Hamster Care Sheet

As with any pet, keeping a hamster requires a commitment to care for it during its life which could be 2-3 years or longer. The commitment required includes not only routine feeding, care and time spent with the hamster but also the provision of veterinary treatment if the hamster becomes ill which can be costly. Although proper care will go a long way to ensuring that any hamster remains happy and healthy.

Cages and Equipment

There are various items of equipment that will be needed for a hamster. It is best to buy the essential items of equipment such as:

- A hamster cage
- Floor covering
- Nesting material
- Water bottle
- Food

These items should be bought before getting a hamster, so that the cage is set up and ready for their arrival.

Feeding

Each hamster will have different tastes and not all hamsters like the same things to eat. However, it is important to know what can and cannot be fed to hamsters to avoid harming the hamster by feeding something which may be poisonous and to help keep the hamster healthy by feeding a healthy diet.

Hamsters have cheek pouches which they use to collect food. They push the food into the pouches which expand and then carry the food to some "safe" place. Here the hamster will empty the food from the pouches by pushing the food forwards and out of the mouth and create a food store. The inner lining of the cheek pouches are very delicate and sharp or sticky foods can become stuck.

Preparing the Cage

Before preparing the cage you should consider where you are going to place the cage. The cage should be placed away from direct sunlight, away from draughts and in a room of constant temperature. Avoid putting the cage near a heater where the hamster may become hot. Also be sure to put the cage out of the way of any other pets which may harm your hamster.

To prepare the cage:

- Place a good layer of wood shavings on the floor(s) of the cage.
- Fill the water bottle with water and fix it to the cage at a height that the hamster will be able to reach comfortably. Check by running your finger over the end of the spout that it is delivering water. If it is not give the bottle a little squeeze, dry the end of the spout and run your finger over it again. Pet Shops sell liquid vitamins which can be added to the water and these can be particularly beneficial if your hamster is ill.
- If you are using a food dish fill it with hamster food and place this in the cage, otherwise sprinkle some on the floor of the cage.
- Place any cage accessories in suitable positions within the cage.
- Place a handful of nesting material in the cage or inside the hamster's "house".
- Fix the Exercise Wheel to the side of the cage or if you have a free standing wheel place this in a suitable position in the cage.

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Handling

Most hamsters can become tame in a very short space of time with gentle regular handling. Hamsters normally only bite because they are frightened.

If the hamster is a bit jumpy or nervous it is a good idea first of all just to get it used to your hand before attempting to lift it out of its cage. Try gently stroking the hamster while it is in its cage and offering it pieces of food from your hand. It will soon realise that it has nothing to fear.

Next try placing your hand in the cage and letting the hamster investigate, and step onto your hand, whilst keeping your hand still.

Once it is happy that there is nothing to fear, take off the top of the cage if possible or open the door of the cage, and gently scoop the hamster up in both hands. Do not hold it too tightly or squeeze it as this may frighten it.

Don’t lift your hamster too high as if it jumps from your hands and falls it may injure itself. It is always best to handle your hamster whilst you are sitting down so that if it does jump it does not have far to fall and will simply land in your lap.

Once you have taken your hamster out of the cage, and are sitting, face the hamster towards you - they seem less inclined to jump if facing towards you. Let the hamster walk from one hand to the other. If your hamster does attempt to jump, let it and then simply pick it up again. It is better to do this than try and hold onto the hamster which may cause it to become frightened. Once it is happy to step from one hand to another, gently start to curve your fingers around it’s body so that it can begin to get the feel of being held.

Before long your hamster should be happy to walk from one hand to another with your fingers wrapped around its body and you can then start facing it away from you whilst you are sitting down and letting it walk again from one hand to another.

Some hamsters are more nervous than others and may take a little longer to become accustomed to being handled. Be patient and gentle and your hamster should become very tame.

If your hamster is really frightened or has had a bad experience being handled and bites whenever handled, try handling it whilst you wear a pair of gloves and handle it as indicated above. The wearing of gloves will help your confidence which in turn will help the hamster. Once the hamster stops biting you can move to handling the hamster without gloves.

Don’t handle your hamster directly after you have been handling food. Hamsters have extremely poor eyesight and rely on their sense of smell - if you’ve just been eating an apple, the hamster will smell this on your hand and think that your hand is an apple and may have a nibble!

Syrian Hamsters are quite easy to handle because of their larger size. Russian hamsters tend to be a little more lively and are not quite so easily handled by small children. The Chinese Hamster is often a delight to handle as they just sit on your hand and use their paws to cling to your fingers - it is often difficult to remove a Chinese from your hand! Another point worth noting about Chinese is that if they are nervous they have a habit of emptying their bladder on your hand! Roborovskis are extremely lively and fast and therefore not a pet that is easily handled. They need to be cupped in your hand to avoid them running away, but they very rarely bite.

Younger children should be supervised when handling hamsters as they may unintentionally squeeze a hamster, causing it to nip or injuring it.