

# The Gerbil Care Guide



By: Ellie Ross

# Introduction

## *What is a gerbil?*

A Gerbil is a small rodent that originates from the desert. Gerbils are about 2-4 ounces in weight. The body of a gerbil is about 5 inches in length, the tail being about 4 ½ inches in length. The whole gerbil is covered in hair, including the tail!

## *How long will my gerbil live?*

Gerbils live about 3 years, sometimes making it into their 5<sup>th</sup> year of life!

## *How does a gerbil act?*

Most healthy gerbils have a curious and energetic demeanor, often spending large amounts of time chewing on cardboard, running around the tank like a manic and intermittently eating a snack or two. Gerbils, unlike their hamster counterparts, are not strictly nocturnal. They have an active period followed by a sleeping period continuously throughout the day and night.

## *Are gerbils noisy?*

The gerbil itself is not noisy. The only sound a gerbil can make is a plaintive squeaking noise, exclusively made when the gerbil is under some sort of stress. However, a gerbil is capable of making large amounts of noise when it chews, scratches, and digs. Also, gerbils thump their hind legs as a danger signal to all other gerbils. This thump is made to be heard by all in the clan so it can be a bit startling to the human ear.

*How much time will I spend caring for my gerbil daily?*

Compared to other pocket-pets gerbils require a small amount of your daily time.

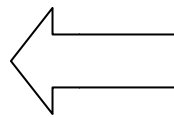
*Can gerbils live alone?*

Gerbils are very social creatures that need the constant companionship only another gerbil can provide. Single gerbils live a shorter, less satisfying life compared to a pair of gerbils.

## Housing

Gerbils are crafty little creatures capable of getting out of most any habitat. One of the only gerbil proof homes is a basic glass tank. Tanks are used because there are no edges to chew, the walls are smooth and the bedding can't be kicked out of the cage. Also, you can fit your tank with a mesh lid that can be weighed down to prevent escape by jumping(they can jump pretty high!).

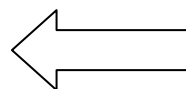
Personally I prefer to house my gerbils in 20 gallon long tanks, these tanks are 30 inches long, 12 inches wide and 12 inches tall. The ample floor space in the 20 gallon long makes it an attractive option, simply because the gerbils have more room to run and you have more room to decorate the space. However, many gerbil owners use a 10 gallon tank to house their critters. To my eye, the 10 gallon looks cramped when filled with boxes for chewing, a wheel and the gerbils themselves.



Ideal gerbil enclosure

You can purchase the tanks and lids from any pet store. I have found that Petsmart and Petco have the best prices. I buy my 20 gallon long tanks for \$30 at Petsmart, the lids are usually \$10. Call ahead to make sure the size you need is in stock.

When you get the tank home it is a good idea to wash it out, you have no clue where it's been! I use a splash of bleach to clean it out, however soap and water would work just fine. But whatever you use it's a good idea to scrub the sides with a rag. Also, make sure that you rinse it out REALLY well, and if you use bleach make sure you give the tank at least 24 hours to completely dry.



DO NOT USE UNDER ANY  
CIRCUMSTANCES

Many new gerbil owners do not realize that their pet is a master escape artist and make the mistake of buying those awesome looking Crittertrail cages with the colorful tubes and hiding places. A gerbil could probably chew through one of those plastic tubes in 5 minutes, which is something I didn't realize when I got my first gerbils. Seven year old me was mesmerized by the maze of tubes and I figured that my new pets would have a blast navigating the twisty passages, little did I know that the enclosure was unsafe. As soon as I got home I took my gerbils out of the tank and into the new cage, watched them for a bit then left the room. When I came back a few hours later the floor of my bedroom was littered with gerbil gifts. Luckily I had closed the door when I left. After a peek under the bed I located my little Houdinis and put them back in their tank. Upon careful examination I figured out that the gerbils had chewed through one of the tubes using one of the air holes as leverage for their teeth .If I had left the door open my gerbils would have run out of the room and probably never be found again. Morale of the story NO PLASTIC CAGES!

## Bedding and Nesting Material

There are literally hundreds of types of bedding on the market advertised for small animals. I recommend using only 2 types. My personal favorite is aspen chips. Aspen is the ONLY, repeat ONLY type of wood shaving that can be safely used for small animals of any species. Aspen bedding does not contain the harmful phenol oils that pine and cedar bedding contain. These oils are inhaled by your pet and can wreak havoc in their body. Certain types of cancer (lung, liver and kidney) are attributed to the use of pine and cedar bedding. Also kidney, liver and lung failure can occur.



Another one of my favorites is Carefresh. Carefresh is made from reclaimed wood pulp, or in other words old paper products mashed together and dried. Carefresh pet bedding is soft and absorbent and ideal if you have a baby or senior citizen. Carefresh also comes in fun colors! One downside

price, a small sack of the stuff can run you \$8!



Most gerbils will make nests to sleep in. Pet stores sell special 'nesting fluff' just for this purpose. Unfortunately, this stuff is deadly. Often it contains strands of wool, these long strands can get tied around and part of your gerbil resulting in the loss of limbs, tails and lives. To prevent these problems just look around your house! Plain, clean, unscented, un-lotioned tissues, napkins or paper towels make terrific bedding material! I usually rip them into smaller sections to make it easier for the gerbils to handle. It is great fun to watch them shred it into little bits and form it into a nest! The colder it is the puffier the nest!

## Food

Gerbils are omnivores, meaning they eat both plant matter and animal products, much like dogs and cats. Because of their unique nutritional needs gerbils usually need more than just the seed mixes in pet stores. Personally, I believe that gerbils need to eat a formulated pelleted diet combined with a seed mix. Gerbils are foragers so it is natural for them to have variety in their diet. Don't worry about them picking out the yummys, they eat it all eventually. I recommend oxbow healthy handfuls as the pellets and either eco-nutrition or Gerri Gerbil food as the seed mix you use. You can supplement their diet with the occasional bit of romaine lettuce, carrot or apple. Gerbils also enjoy Cherrios, dog or cat kibbles, un-cooked whole-grain pasta, pumpkin seeds(unsalted and baked if home made), peanuts(unsalted), sunflower seeds(unsalted), scrambled eggs (NO BUTTER!), spray millet and some gerbils even eat crickets and mealworms! Fruits and vegetables should be fed sparingly because of the high water contents, however everything else on the list is okay to feed every day, with the exception of dog and cat kibbles(once a week at most).



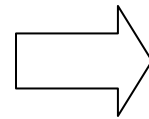
## Tank Accessories

As you might have guessed, you will need more in the tank than just bedding and food! This section will guide on what else you will need to furnish the tank.

### *Water Bottles*

Because gerbils originate from the desert their water needs are relatively low. A 4 ounce water bottle is perfect for a pair of gerbils, they will not drink more than 4-10 mL of water a day. A special water bottle holder will be needed to securely hang it in the tank.

Example of water bottle holder



### *Wheels*

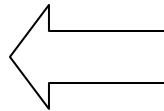
A wheel is a staple in any gerbil tank. Most gerbils will run on their wheels with reckless abandon. Any 6-8 inch wheel is the perfect size to comfortably allow a gerbil to run. It is important that the wheel is either made of solid material or metal mesh. Wheels that have rungs are dangerous for gerbils because of their tail, the tail could easily get caught in a rung and become broken. Below are examples of acceptable wheels.





## *Cardboard*

Gerbils have a strong urge to chew throughout their life time. To help with this urge I supply my gerbils with cardboard boxes to chew on. Any sort of clean, cardboard will do. Examples include Kool-aid or Capri-sun boxes, tissue boxes(take out ALL plastic), toilet paper tubes, paper towel tubes, drink holders(from any fast food place), cardboard egg cartons, popcorn boxes, cracker boxes, chicken nugget boxes, fry containers, the list goes on and on! Be creative!



**Gerbil enjoying a toilet paper tube**

To help you shop for your gerbil I have formulated a list to take with you when you go shopping:

- 20 gallon long tank
- Mesh lid
- 4 ounce water bottle
- Water bottle holder
- Healthy handfals and Econutrition/ Gerri Gerbil
- Wheel
- Bedding
- Timothy hay( for nest building, chewing and eating)

Extras!

- Small wooden house(for chewing/sleeping in)
- Treat sticks
- Rope perch( for climbing)
- PVC pipes(for chewing and burrowing)

## Daily Check List

There are several tasks that need to be done EVERY DAY, to keep a gerbil happy. I have made a list of the most basic.

- Check bedding for water bottle leakage
- Freshen water in water bottle
- Give fresh food
- Offer treats
- Handle the gerbils(look for weight loss, watery eyes/nose/anus)
- Give new cardboard

## Every 2 weeks

- Scrub out tank with soap and water(rinse/ dry thoroughly!)
- Fresh bedding

## Handling and Taming

Gerbils are the easiest to tame of all the pocket pets. Before in the food section I mentioned all the healthy treats you can give your gerbils, these treats will be essential in helping to tame your gerbils. Baby gerbils from a reputable breeder should already be well on their way to being tame.

The taming process should take about 2 or 3 weeks, the definition of tame being unafraid of human hands or being picked up. To start out place a variety treats in the palm of your hand. Carefully place your hand on the floor of the tank and wait for them to come and investigate. Most gerbils will come within one or two minutes. Be careful to make no sudden movements as they most likely get frightened. Eventually they will begin to take the tasties from your hand and run to a corner to eat them. Later on they will start eating around your hand or sitting on your hand. Once the gerbils have started to eat or stay close to your hand you can begin to pick them up. It is easier and safer to pick up a gerbil by the base of the tail(the part closest to the body) rather than to try to grab the body. Let your gerbil run on your hands(move them like a treadmill) for couple minutes everyday. After this you can start to gently restrain the gerbil while stroking their head with your finger. You can tell when your gerbil is comfortable in your hand when they don't struggle and/or relax their head. Some gerbils 'purr', this can't be heard but felt, it feels like the gerbil is vibrating. After months of socialization most gerbils will begin to purr as they feel extremely at ease in human hands. Some of my gerbils will even eat treats while in my hands! It is truly rewarding when your gerbil gives you that level of trust.

The main things to remember while taming your gerbil are...

- your gerbil is not likely to bite unless extremely frightened or in pain
- At first your gerbil WILL be afraid
- BE PATIENT
- take it slow
- have fun!

## Behavior

With my first pair of gerbils, I was always asking myself, what the heck are they doing?!? I hope to help you avoid that with this little section.

Chewing- a natural gerbil behavior done about 92383727649 times a day

Originates from the need to find nesting material in the cold, Mongolian highlands.

Digging in corners- Gerbils are burrowing animals, so it is only natural for them to burrow. However, most tanks don't have a burrowing system within, and for this reason gerbils make due by digging in the corners.

Curled in Ball- Gerbils sleep curled in a ball, unless he/she is not breathing I can assure that he/she is alive. If you wake them(GENTLY) you sometimes get to see the cute spectacle of gerbil stretching and yawning. ( Curling into a ball is different that ROLLING into ball, rolling into a ball is the sudden death round in a gerbil show down, BEWARE)

Nose Touch- Gerbils greet each other with a nose touch. It looks a bit like a kiss to the untrained eye. Some gerbil fanatics(like myself) believe that when a gerbil touches its nose to yours it is greeting you in a sense.

Licking Tank Walls- Gerbils only do this when in need of water. Please make sure the water bottle is never blocked and always full with fresh water

Back-Foot Stomping- Gerbils will stomp their back feet to alert the other gerbs of danger. Most often made when your gerbs are surprised by something. Gerbils also thump back feet when ready to mate. The mating thump is almost inaudible though.

Winking- Gerbils wink for 3 reasons, to show submission, gratitude and pleasure, only context to decipher the true meaning of a wink.

"The Army Crawl"- gerbils will rub their bellies (it looks like an army crawl) to scent mark things, Much like a dog lifting its leg. Most often done in a new place or in a clean tank.

Squeaking- The only vocalization a gerbil makes is a squeak. Squeaking can mean several things discomfort, frustration, stress, or excitement. If your gerbil squeaks while in your hand loosen your grip or put him back.

Grooming- Gerbils are very clean animals. They almost compulsively groom each other and themselves. If another gerbil has pinned its friend down and appears to be biting him all over his body, don't interrupt! It grooming time.

## Health Problems

Unfortunately, gerbils aren't invincible and can get sick. Here are the signs to watch out for:

- -puffed up fur
- -dull coat
- -runny eyes
- -runny nose(gerbil mucus is red, 9/10 times its not a bloody nose it's a runny nose)
  
- - Lack of appetite
- Constantly laying down/doesn't move often
- Doesn't drink at least once a day
- Will not care if picked up and held Is limp and doesn't start getting excited/move a lot when held.
- Sneezing
- Scratching
- Lack of appetite
- Loss of weight
- Loss of fur

If you see one or more of these symptoms in excess please contact a vet and check out The American Gerbil Society's health page.