



Gerbils

You want your new pet to be happy – and so do we. So we've put together this guide to caring for gerbils, which is handy if you already have gerbils or are thinking about getting them. Gerbils can make good family pets, and with the right care and attention, they can become friendly towards people. They're fun to watch and, with patience and care, can be easily handled. They have evolved to withstand desert conditions, therefore they tend to produce little waste by conserving water and nutrition. Likely to live: 4 years, with some living longer. Gerbils are very active during the day and love to dig!

A happy home

Gerbils originally come from hot, dry deserts where they burrow tunnels in the ground. To keep them comfy, you'll need a gerbilarium. Ideally, this should be made of glass with a solid floor, and a wire top for ventilation. For your pets to burrow, you'll need an area at least 20cm deep when filled with suitable material, plus around 20cm clear above ground, so your gerbils can stand up straight.

The more, the merrier

Gerbils like company and, in the wild, live in burrows in large family groups. Don't have a gerbil by itself, as they may become unhappy and ill. Keep them in pairs or groups of the same sex who have grown up together. Check every day to make sure they're all getting on and provide lots of spaces and hidey holes they can escape to and cool their tempers. Be careful of introducing newcomers as they often get bullied, especially if they're over 10 weeks old. Some adult gerbils even find being next to each other in separate gerbilariums stressful.

Creature comforts

Fill the burrowing area with a safe non-toxic sand-topsoil mix or tortoise soil substrate. Other suitable materials include a mix of rough-grained woodchips and hay, but not sawdust. Don't use garden soil either as it could be contaminated with bacteria or parasites. Your gerbils will soon get to work making tunnels. The glass sides will let you see into their underground world! Avoid using hamster cages, as they don't usually have a deep enough base for digging. Finally, place the gerbilarium out of direct sunlight and away from radiators or draughts, electrical equipment and other pets.

Hide and peek

As well as their tunnels, give your gerbilariums some hidey holes. These small, enclosed spaces are where gerbils can sleep safely and escape if feeling afraid. Include multiple entrances so gerbils can't trap each other inside or prevent them from entering. Fill these spaces with hay or ink-free paper nesting materials, like cardboard toilet roll tubes. Gerbils love to shred!

Do not use cotton wool for bedding or synthetic fibres, which may get caught around limbs or cause blockages if eaten. Elsewhere in the gerbilarium, put in some gnawing toys and tubes for them to explore – even a wheel if there's space. But make sure it's solid (rather than one with open rungs), as gerbils can trap their tails and feet if there are gaps.

Get nibbling

Feed your gerbils every day with a suitable gerbil specific food. Our gerbils all eat Pets at Home gerbil food. If you carry on feeding them this, they're less likely to have an upset tummy. If you do want to change their diet, introduce new food slowly over a period of about 10 days, phasing out the old food completely.

Going green

Top up your gerbils' diet with very small pieces of fresh fruit & vegetables, like apples and carrots. But not too much as this can cause tummy upsets. Avoid foods with too much carbohydrate or fat as this can lead to obesity, digestive upsets and diarrhoea. If there's a change in your gerbils eating or drinking habits, take them to the vet.

Food play

Stimulate your gerbils by hiding food around the gerbilarium, as this imitates natural foraging. Hideaway holes allow them to store their food just as they would in the wild. Check these daily and remove any stale food.

Freshen up

Fresh water is a must for all animals, so it should be checked twice and changed once daily and needs to be in a suitable bottle. Check the bottle every day to ensure that water is flowing through and that the nozzle isn't blocked or leaking.

Settling in

Although it's hard, hold back your excitement and give your gerbils plenty of time and space to get to know both you and their new home. Moving home is a stressful time for everyone, small animals included! When bringing your gerbils home, try giving them a probiotic supplement to settle their tummies. Once they're in, keep a very close eye on them without causing any disruption and avoid handling them until they are settled.

Handle with care

Gerbils aren't naturally fond of being handled, so building a bond will take time. Start by speaking softly so they get to know your voice. Next, carefully introduce your hand into the gerbilarium with a tasty treat on it. Don't rush, let them come to you. They're naturally curious and will eventually climb on your hand. Eventually, try lifting them up by cupping them with both hands gently but firmly around the body. Never pick one up the tail – it's very painful for them.

Always hold them near to the floor or a surface, so if they do wriggle loose, they won't fall far and hurt themselves. Keep a close eye on children when handling small pets.

A healthy gerbil

A good diet and a clean cage will keep your gerbil healthy. Gerbils like to keep their coats clean and healthy with regular grooming. Pop some small animal bathing sand in a shallow dish each day to help them do this. Afterwards, remove the sand and dispose of it.

On the move

You have to be careful moving gerbils around, it can make them stressed and ill. So, move them together with their friends, ideally in their gerbilarium, but if this isn't possible, use a secure, tough plastic carrier. Remember to pop some familiar smelling bedding in the carrier and in their new home.

Smile please!

Gerbils' teeth grow all the time. Keep the length down by giving them lots of wooden chews and suitable branches to nibble on, as well as the right nesting materials to shred. A gerbil's teeth shouldn't be visible when their mouth is closed. Regularly check their teeth and speak with your vet if you're worried.

Tidy by nature

Clean your gerbilarium every couple of weeks and deep clean every couple of months (toilet areas may need cleaning more often). Bedding and nesting material will also need to be changed regularly as required. Cleaning can be stressful for gerbils, and they rely on scent to communicate, so to reassure them, put a small amount of used but unsoiled bedding back in with the fresh.

Bright eyes

Healthy gerbils are happy, curious and playful souls, with soft, shiny fur, bright eyes and a clean nose. The right diet, a clean gerbilarium, and regular check-ups at the vet will keep them in good condition. But do check them yourself daily. Teary eyes, a runny nose, ruffled fur, a loss of appetite and sluggishness all mean a trip to the vet. If you spot sores around their nose or mouth, these may be caused by rough bedding, so swap for something softer.

Health and hygiene

All pets can carry diseases, some of which can pass to people. Always clean your hands with soap and water after handling or feeding your pets, or cleaning their home and equipment, and ensure children do the same. Always supervise children to ensure they do not put pets (or objects that pets have been in contact with) near their mouths. It is best to avoid kissing your pet. Children under 5, pregnant women, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems should pay extra attention to hygiene when feeding, handling or cleaning out pets, their housing and accessories. Do not clean pet equipment with your normal washing up.

If you are ever bitten by a small animal, the bite wound should be promptly cleaned and disinfected before being covered by a waterproof dressing. Seek medical advice if you feel unwell following the bite. Full detailed guidance is available at the Public Health England website: www.gov.uk/government/publications/pet-rats-micehamsters-reducing-the-risk-of-infection

Adopting gerbils

Caring for gerbils is a big responsibility. If you think you're ready, have researched their welfare needs and you are committed to caring for them for their whole lives, why not consider giving a home to one of the rescue gerbils at our 'Pets Foundation' centres, and other animal charities.

Happy gerbil checklist

- Large gerbilarium
- Shelters
- Suitable bedding
- Cardboard, paper or hay for nesting material
- Pets at Home gerbil muesli
- Suitable fruit and vegetables
- Food bowl
- Water bottle
- Bottle brush
- Tubes and wooden toys
- Solid-based running wheel
- Gnawing blocks or sticks

- Small animal bathing sand and dish
- Stones for burrows and nails
- Pet safe disinfectant
- Gerbil treats
- A book on gerbils
- Time for your new friends
- Local vet to register your gerbils with

The five welfare needs

A good home - Your gerbil needs a suitable place to live

A healthy diet - The right food for a healthy, balanced diet and fresh water on tap

Ways to stay happy - The chance to do what gerbils love, with lots of areas to dig and explore

The right company - Being with, or away from, other animals

Help to be healthy - Protection against pain, injury, suffering and disease

Pets bring so much joy to children and adults alike that they soon become a much-loved part of your family. But ownership is a big responsibility. There can be unexpected vet bills, and not every pet can be insured. So, please think carefully before buying one, and make sure you can afford the potential costs involved. Not only is it the right thing to do, but under animal welfare law, you're legally obliged as an owner to give your pet any care they might need during their lifetime.

Pets at Home

Visit your nearest pet care centre to pick up essentials for your gerbil, or you can shop online at www.petsathome.com.

The Pets Foundation

Changes do happen, and if you can no longer care for a pet you've bought from us, please get in touch so we can try to rehome them. Never abandon your pet or let them loose in the wild.