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features



Ellie Teshler
Wise, witty, pull no punches advice column. >B7

■ PETS

Tiny, furry friends

Proper care for hamster or gerbil starts with picking the right cage

When adding a new furry friend to your household, have you considered a hamster or gerbil?

Jessica D'Amico
Animal Talk



These very small animals require less maintenance and financial commitment than puppies and kittens, and they can provide great companionship for children and adults alike. That being said, proper care and appropriate interaction for these little creatures is still essential.

The right cage is the first step towards giving your pet a good quality of life. A good option is a wire cage with a solid base, to provide a strong and well-ventilated home for your pet. An appropriate size for a cage with one to two rodents would be a minimum of 20 by 20 inches and approximately one foot tall, ideally consisting of several levels. These little guys like multiple floors to climb, and tunnels to travel through.

Need to know

- Good treats for hamsters or gerbils include sunflower or pumpkin seeds (in moderation), kale leaves, carrots and apples (no seeds).
- Unsafe foods for hamsters or gerbils include onions, fruit pits and seeds, potatoes, rhubarb and iceberg lettuce (in excess).
- For more information go to www.sPCA.bc.ca/pet-care/behaviour/mice-rats-hamsters-and-gerbils/

An aquarium can also do the job, but will not provide ideal ventilation. Plastic cages featuring tunnel systems, while entertaining for your critter, also provide less ventilation and are susceptible to being chewed through.

Loose paper bedding or shavings such as Carefresh or Aspen provide ideal bedding for hamsters and gerbils. Why? Because these guys love to dig. Fill the bottom of your cage with at least two to three inches of bedding. Do not use pine or cedar shavings as they may harm your pet's respiratory system.

Habitats should be cleaned and bedding replaced at least once a week, depending on the size of the cage and the number of rodents in the enclosure. Gerbils are social animals—pairs of males or females raised together are ideal. Hamsters are not as social so house them individually to prevent fights.

■ **advice**



JESSICA D'AMICO/SUBMITTED PHOTO

Newton, a Russian hamster, eats his kibble. Hamsters can fit enough food in their cheek pouches to last several meals.

Also, never put unfamiliar rodents in an enclosure together. Feed quality food such as Oxbow pellets every day to



JESSICA D'AMICO/SUBMITTED PHOTO

This is a good example of good-sized wire cage with a solid base, a maze for entertainment, a wheel and a hammock for added comfort. There are also multiple levels and two to three inches minimum of bedding.

ensure adequate nutrition. Exercise is very important for the wellbeing of your hamster or gerbil. Provide wheels and mazes in the habitat.

You can also put your rodent in a hamster ball to safely run around the house for 30 minutes a day.

Gerbils and hamsters love to chew, and they need to do so because their teeth grow continuously. Provide wood chews and undyed cardboard like

toilet paper rolls to keep your pet busy and happy, while also trimming the teeth.

Hamsters and gerbils mainly sleep throughout the day and come out to play and eat at night.

Hamsters do a good job of cleaning themselves, but gerbils require dust baths occasionally. You will notice that your gerbil's fur appears oily.

Leave a small plate in the habitat with a scoop of gerbil dust bought from your local pet store.

Gerbils roll around in their dust bath, which is very entertaining to watch.

Do not give water baths to these rodents because this may strip their natural oils.

Your local animal shelter will often have rodents for adoption. Locate an exotic animal veterinarian for health concerns and general advice, and make sure to have fun with your little critter.

Next month in Animal Talk: Update re cosmetic surgery in dogs

■ **Happy adoption**



RIKIS SULLIS PHOTOGRAPHY/SUBMITTED PHOTO

Ryder, a Labrador and husky mix was adopted in May of 2016. Star and Collin say Ryder loves hiking, playing at the dog park and being a bed hog. He is very enthusiastic when playing with his toys, especially tug of war. Ryder has become more than a pet, he has become a member of the family.

Jessica D'Amico is a student at the Atlantic Veterinary College. Animal Talk is a monthly column in The Guardian produced by the Companion Animal Welfare Initiative (CAWI), the goal of which is to improve the welfare of owned and un-owned companion animals on P.E.I. CAWI consists of the P.E.I. Humane Society, SpayAid, Cat Action Team, PE. Veterinary Medical Association, P.E.I. Department of Agriculture and Forestry, P.E.I. 4-H and Sir James Dunn Animal Welfare Centre at AVC. For more information, see gov.pe.ca/agriculture/CAWI. Readers may send questions related to the well being of owned and unowned companion animals to askcawi@gmail.com.