

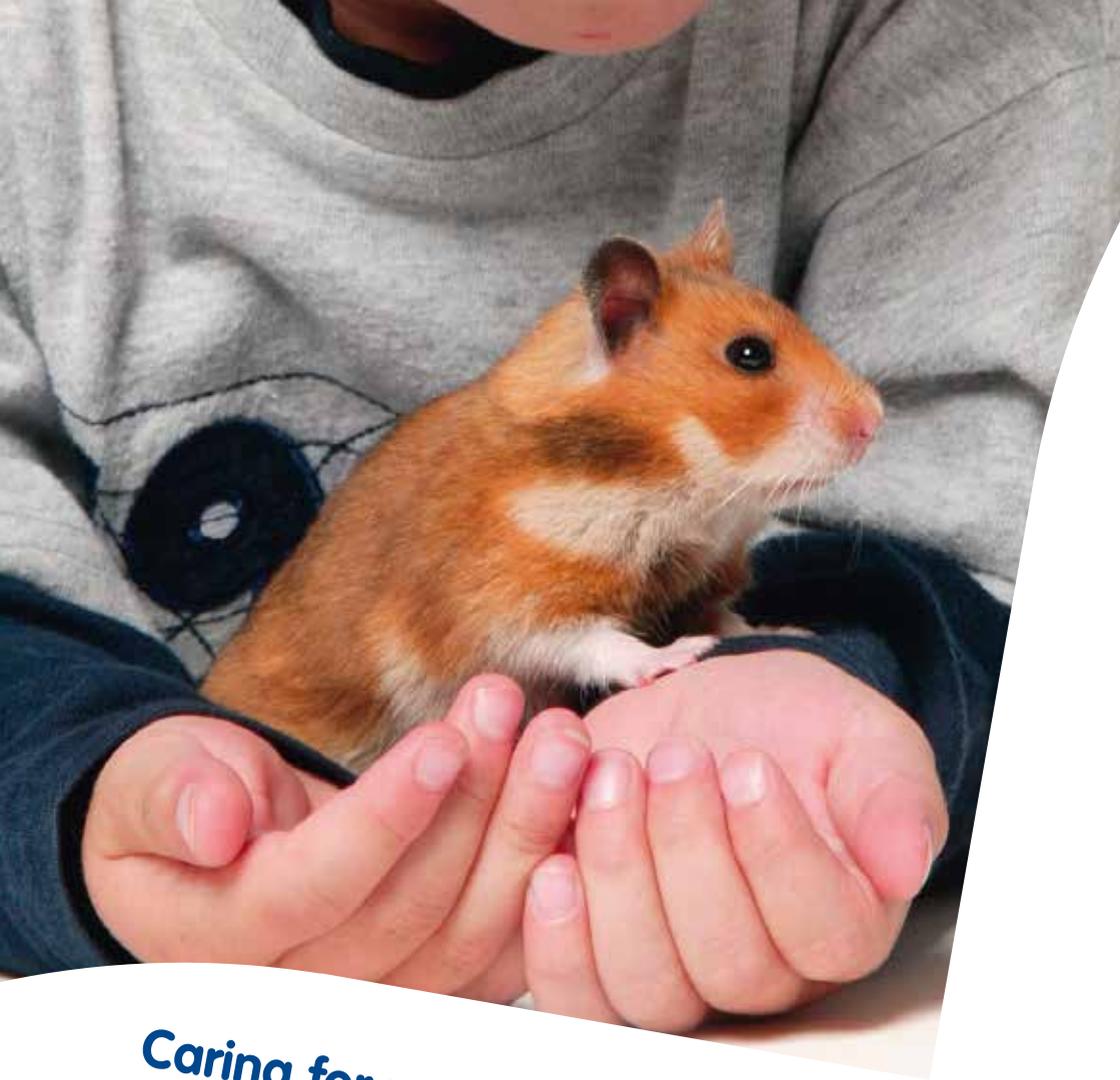
**SMALL PETS 5**

# Caring for your hamsters



**BLUE** FOR  
PETS  
**CROSS**

The charity dedicated to  
helping sick, injured and  
homeless pets since 1897.



## **Caring for your hamsters**

**Hamsters are the best known and one of the most popular of all the small rodents kept as pets. They live for around two or three years.**

The most common and largest type of hamster is the Syrian hamster, also known as the golden hamster. These are naturally solitary and will fight if you try to keep them in pairs or groups – breeders have to be careful to introduce mating pairs only when the female is in season. If you want a Syrian hamster, only keep one!

Dwarf hamsters grow to about 8cm and enjoy company of their own kind but it's best to keep a pair or group of females as males tend to fight. Never mix species.

Ideally your new hamster should be between four and eight weeks old and bought from a responsible breeder or good pet shop. Hamsters in pet shops should have clean, good-sized accommodation (see Home comforts) and access to food and fresh water.

Hamsters become sexually mature as young as four weeks, so make sure that males and females have been correctly sexed and separated – the breeder or pet shop staff should be able to show you the difference between the sexes. If they are not confident, you cannot be sure that you have not bought a pregnant hamster.

Blue Cross occasionally has hamsters available for rehoming.

## Home comforts

The ideal home for a Syrian hamster is a large wire cage with a plastic base no smaller than 60cm x 30cm floor space, by 30cm tall. Hamsters love climbing on different levels so a cage even taller than this is better but be careful not to make it too high in case they fall and hurt themselves. Wood should be avoided as it absorbs urine and quickly becomes smelly and unhygienic.

Dwarf hamsters can squeeze through small places so are best kept in a tank or aquarium no smaller than 60cm x 30cm floor space, by 30cm tall. The tank needs a securely fitted wire lid to allow ventilation and stop them escaping.

Dust-extracted bedding is good for all types of hamsters. Hamsters can be litter-trained, which helps to keep their cage cleaner. Dwarf hamsters need beds deep enough to allow them to burrow. You should also provide shredded paper or dry peat as nesting material. Avoid fluffy bedding that could wrap around a hamster's limbs and cause stomach problems if eaten. Make sure your hamster's home is away from draughts, sunlight and direct heat. Clean out the cage at least once a week.

## Food for thought

A commercial hamster mix is a good basis for your pet's diet. Hamsters also like small pieces of fruit and vegetables, like a slice of apple or a small sprig of cauliflower. Hamsters hoard food in their beds, so do not give them too many green vegetables because they will rot. Remove all uneaten food every day. They also store food in their cheek pouches (see Health matters).

A hamster's front teeth, like those of other rodents, grow continually so they need to gnaw to keep them in shape. Dog biscuits make both good hamster treats and teeth trimmers. Fresh water must always be available from a free-access drinking bottle fastened to the cage. Check this daily to see that it has not become blocked and also to change the water.

## Health matters

Storing food in cheek pouches can occasionally lead to problems. If your hamster seems to have permanently stuffed cheeks, it could be because food has become impacted. Sharp pieces of food may also occasionally pierce their pouches. Always seek veterinary advice because, if either of these has caused an infection, the hamster may need antibiotics.

The other common problem needing veterinary help is wet tail, which is diarrhoea associated with stress, especially in newly weaned babies. You can minimise the risk by preparing the cage before you bring the hamster home and leaving them undisturbed, except for feeding, for the first two or three days. Be careful handling your hamster when you have a cold as you can pass this on to them.

It's useful to know that hamsters have scent glands on opposite sides of their flanks, which can look like small, dark patches. These are normal. The testicles of male hamsters enlarge in the spring, so two large swellings at the bottom end of your hamster are usually nothing to worry about. However, if you are at all concerned about your hamster's health, do consult a vet.

Finally, it is worth remembering that hamsters are short sighted, especially those with pink eyes, so keep a close eye on yours if let out of the cage.



## Exercise and entertainment

Hamsters are most active during the evening which can be a problem if they are kept in a child's bedroom. They like cardboard tubes to chew and run through and, if you put up a wooden ledge, they will enjoy climbing on it. Many experts now advise against using hamster wheels with spokes because it can cause an injury. Solid, wide wheels are safer. Hamster exercise balls should not be used as hamsters can quickly become exhausted with no means of escape.

## Company

One Syrian hamster will be happy, but two or more means serious fighting – so keep them alone. Dwarf hamsters can enjoy company but this isn't always the case. Males are likely to fight but females tend to get on better. Don't mix species and remember, hamsters can reach sexual maturity at just one month old.

## Hamsters as children's pets

Hamsters are naturally nocturnal so if they are disturbed during the day and become alarmed, they may bite. Children need to be supervised when handling hamsters and, as with all pets, an adult needs to be responsible for making sure the hamster is properly cared for.



## Getting to know you

Hamsters rarely bite if they are used to being handled correctly from an early age. Never put your hand into your hamster's bed as they may be asleep and will be startled. If your hamster is nervous, check they are properly awake then hold your hand in the cage without trying to touch them, so that your presence and smell becomes familiar. Soon your hamster will get to know you and become easier to handle.

## Don't forget...

- Keep Syrian hamsters alone as adults will fight. Dwarf hamsters can be kept in female-only pairs or groups
- Hamsters enjoy fresh fruit and vegetables, but like to bury their food. Give them tiny portions to minimise the amount left to decompose and remove uneaten food daily
- Clean out the hamster house every week to maintain a healthy environment

# Happy, healthy pets

**Blue Cross** advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)

**Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:**

- blog posts from Blue Cross experts
- latest news
- events near you
- pets needing new homes

**Or you can join in the chat on our online communities. Find us on Twitter and Facebook – just search for Blue Cross.**



## Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

## How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

**Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)**



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