

OVERVIEW

The Chinese or striped hamster (*Cricetulus griseus*) is often referred to as a dwarf hamster because it certainly is smaller than the common Syrian hamster, but it is unrelated to the true dwarf hamsters of the genus *Phodopus* that inhabit the same general region (northern China and Mongolia). (Note: Some taxonomists distinguish two species, reserving the term “striped” for *C. barabensis*; others consider it a subspecies). Unlike the social *Phodopus* (Robo, Campbell’s and winter white dwarf hamsters), the Chinese “dwarf” is a solitary animal more like the Syrian hamster. It does best alone or in sexual pairs. Although this hamster sometimes has a reputation for biting, it actually tames down very nicely with patient, gentle attempts over time and can become the most docile of the small hamsters. This is particularly true of the male. The Chinese hamster has an elongated body with a longer tail than other hamsters. Coat color varies from grey to brown with a darker dorsal stripe. Color mutations being produced include the white-spotted or dominant spot and the very rare dark-eyed white.

The Chinese dwarf hamster is a solitary, unsocial rodent as is best housed one per cage unless you choose to keep a sexual pair for breeding purposes.

HOUSING

An aquarium outfitted with a secure metal-framed screen top may be the best housing for Chinese dwarf hamsters, but a wire cage with very narrow bar spacing may also be used except for breeding pairs since young will escape. Even though these are small hamsters, purchase the largest size you can accommodate. Any housing filled with a couple inches of processed paper bedding (e.g. CareFRESH®) or aspen shavings. **DO NOT USE PINE OR CEDAR SHAVINGS.** These soft woods have toxic “aromatic” oils that are harmful to small rodents.

Dwarf hamsters should be provided with a “mini” or “small” size of the familiar hamster wheel or a similar exercise method. The new plastic saucer-style “wheels” are safer and quieter. There is an endless variety of hamster shelters, mazes and toys on the market to provide enrichment for the pet Chinese dwarf. Even a simple paper towel or toilet paper tube makes a welcome diversion and can be shredded into nesting material.

FOOD & WATER

All hamsters should be fed a quality “lab block” rodent diet. These diets provide complete nutrition in every bite and wear down the teeth. Seed mixes are nutritionally poor as they allow a chosen favorite seed (often fatty sunflower seeds) to make up the bulk of the diet and should not be used. Dwarf hamsters are omnivorous and may also take some cereals, nuts, vegetables and animal matter such as mealworms or bits of cooked poultry for occasional variety. This dietary variety from a young age can result in a longer lifespan. **Do not switch from a lab diet to a seed mix!** Water should be provided via a ball-tip water bottle.

Consult an exotic animal veterinarian for treatment of any pet condition or illness.

HEALTH

Dwarf hamsters do not have many health problems when housed and fed correctly. The most likely problem to encounter is fur mites, which will cause itching, bald patches and skin problems. These may be treated with anti-mite sprays designed for small animals and/or caged birds in conjunction with a thorough cleaning and disinfection of the housing, shelters and toys, and frequent replacement of bedding. Consult your vet for more information.