

OVERVIEW

The Djungarian dwarf hamster (*Phodopus sungorus*) is also known as the Siberian or winter white dwarf hamster. The latter name is a reference to its usual seasonal change to a white winter coat. As winter approaches and the days shorten, the Djungarian hamster's dark coat is almost entirely replaced with denser white fur. It is often confused with the Russian or Campbell's dwarf hamster *Phodopus campbelli* because both have been referred to as the Djungarian or Dzungarian hamster and they are very similar in appearance. Dzungaria is a region in northwestern China. In the US we tend to call *P. campbelli* the Russian or, better still, Campbell's dwarf (as that is its species name), and refer to *P. sungorus* as the Djungarian, Siberian or "winter white" dwarf hamster. However, many people consider Djungarian to only refer to the Campbell's dwarf and distinguish the "winter white" *P. sungorus* as the Siberian dwarf hamster. Confused? Me too, so I choose to use "Campbell's" and "winter white" and avoid region references like Djungarian, Russian and Siberian. The recognizable differences between the two species are that *P. campbelli* has smaller ears, a narrower dorsal stripe, a woolier coat, and greyish fur on its underside. Although the winter white dwarf hamster has not been bred in as many color varieties as its Campbell's dwarf relative, coat color does vary and a popular new orangish coat is called Sunfire. These beautiful hamsters range from golden yellow to rust-orange.

HOUSING

An aquarium outfitted with a secure metal-framed screen top may be the best housing for dwarf hamsters, but a wire cage with very narrow bar spacing may also be used except for breeding pairs since young will escape. New cages specifically designed for dwarf hamsters, basically miniature versions of the popular tube network Syrian hamster cages, are also available and very popular. They provide an interesting landscape that features wheels and tubes that are psychologically beneficial. 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 winter white dwarf hamster. 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.