

**OVERVIEW**

The gerbil is an energetic, daytime active rodent with a long tail ending in a brushy plume. Known as desert rats, many types of gerbil range across the arid lands of Africa to Asia, but it is the Mongolian gerbil or clawed jird, *Meriones unguiculatus*, that has been domesticated as a very popular house pet.

**HOUSING**

Cages designed for hamsters are unsuitable for gerbils. Gerbils will quickly gnaw through plastic and want to create their own tunnels in a depth of substrate, not have a network of tubes provided for them. An aquarium outfitted with a secure metal-framed screen top is best used and should be filled with a good depth of processed paper bedding (e.g. CareFRESH®) or aspen shavings. Corn cob litter may also be used, but a softer substrate is preferred.

**DO NOT USE PINE OR CEDAR SHAVINGS.** Although the dangers of cedar's toxic aromatic oils may be well-known to the reader, the fact that pine shavings should not be used with gerbils may be a surprise. Pine can cause respiratory problems in gerbils, especially with pups (babies). Cardboard drink carriers are great for providing three needs: first, as enrichment as temporary hides and places to investigate, second as objects to provide gnawing activity, and finally as nesting material. Wood nesting boxes may also be used as more permanent shelters. Plain, white unscented tissue or paper towel may be used as nesting material for these boxes. The American Gerbil Society advises against using commercial rodent nesting material due to entanglement and ingestion dangers.

Gerbils are social animals and do best kept as monogamous sexual pairs. For those who do not wish to have babies, same-sex groups can be problematic, but two males may be a better choice than two females. Pet stores that keep groups soon learn that females are even more likely to fight amongst themselves than males that do not have a female present. Never keep more than two adult females together and never breed more than one female in a cage. Additionally, gerbils use their strong sense of smell to identify each other and will often reject newly introduced gerbils from "another clan" with violence. It is best to introduce cohabitants when very young.

**FOOD & WATER**

Gerbils 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 only be given sparingly as an occasional treat. Hand-offered sunflower seeds do make for a good taming method in moderation. Bits of apple or carrot may also be offered very occasionally. Water should be provided via a small ball-tip water bottle that is hung in a metal protective holder.

**HEALTH**

A seriously ill gerbil, such as one not eating or drinking or having diarrhea, should be seen by a veterinarian. Gerbils are susceptible to respiratory illness, which may be caused by both environmental (e.g., stress, the use of pine or cedar bedding) and pathogenic (viruses or bacteria) causes. Ornycycline® found in most pet store bird departments may be added to the water (canary dosage) as immediate treatment, but a veterinarian should be consulted as soon as possible.

Fur mites are not uncommon in gerbils and will necessitate veterinary assistance with using a dilute pyrethrin spray (hamster/gerbil mite sprays are also available in pet stores). Complete and thorough cage cleaning and disinfection is also necessary. Signs of mites are itching (gerbil or keeper!) and may be detected by firmly holding a gerbil wrapped in a white tissue for a minute or two and then inspecting the tissue carefully for the presence of dark or red flecks.

A gerbil should never be picked up by its tail, even at the base. The plume end will detach readily and broken tails are common due to handling or exercise wheel accidents.

**MORE INFO**

See [http://agsgerbils.org/Learn/Gerbil\\_Care\\_Handbook/index.php](http://agsgerbils.org/Learn/Gerbil_Care_Handbook/index.php) for an excellent resource.