

Species of the Week

Gerbils

Gerbils range in size from 8 to 18 cm long, plus a long tail that is 8 to 23 cm long. These tiny rodents weigh up to 200 grams. The coat colour ranges from white to grey to light brown (which is good camouflage in their sandy habitat). Gerbils have keen hearing. Like all rodents, the gerbil's front top teeth continue to grow throughout its life. It must gnaw on hard things to keep wearing the teeth down. They are small, typically white bellied rodents which are found in Central Asia, India, the Middle East, and Africa. They inhabit savannah, steppe, hot desert and semi-desert regions of these countries.

The gerbil usually kept as a pet is the Mongolian Gerbil also known as the Clawed Jird (Latin name -- *Meriones unguiculatus* meaning Little Clawed Warrior). It was first seen by Europeans in Eastern Mongolia in 1867. They were successfully bred outside Mongolia in the 1930's in Japan and in 1954 they were imported to the USA and from there several pairs were sent to UK in 1964.

The lifespan of a gerbil is between 3 to 5 years. They are very sociable animals and it is better to keep them in pairs. There are many choices of homes for Gerbils, ranging from a simple cage to cages with numerous tunnels. The choice is up to you and your wallet. If you purchase a wheel make sure it is a gerbil wheel – wooden – as the gerbils can get caught in the wire hamster wheels.

Fresh fruit and vegetables as well as crickets and wax worms can be given to supplement pre packaged foods that are available, do not just feed pre packaged foods. For non-breeding pets look for a moderate protein content (about 12%) and a fat content between 6% and 8%. For breeding gerbils 15%-16% protein and 7-9% fat is recommended. For geriatric (past breeding age or about two years old) 10-11% protein and 3-5% fat works well. Try to have as much variety in of food as possible in any of these diets to be sure the gerbils are getting all the micronutrients they need. Remember that gerbils are highly active animals that need fat for energy and to keep their coats soft, but too much will give you obese animals in a year or two.

Gerbils will want soft stuff to make their nests with. Tissue paper, cotton balls, cotton batting out of medicine bottles, used paper that you were planning to throw out, ect. all make good nesting materials. Tear the paper into strips and crumple it, but other than that, they will make the nest all by themselves, shredding and fluffing with their teeth and paws. Depending on the size of the cage and the type of bedding that is used, they will need to be cleaned out anywhere from once a week to once a month. When it starts to smell, or seems dirty, clean it. Just about a quarter inch coating of litter on the bottom of the cages is fine; although if you want them to be able to dig and make a few tunnels here and there several inches is better

Gerbils, like most rodents, have a strong chewing instinct. They can keep their teeth at the proper length by grinding them together unless the teeth do not line up properly, but still instinctively chew on anything they can get their teeth on. Cardboard or store bought chew sticks are OK, but the cheapest and best thing to do is to use branches and bark from trees in your area. Pine cones are a great hit too.