



There are **5 main categories of care** covered in this guide:

1. **Environment (pages 2-4)**
2. **Company (pages 4-5)**
3. **Behaviour (pages 5-6)**
4. **Diet (pages 6-7)**
5. **Health & Welfare (pages 7-8)**

## ENVIRONMENT

- Not exposed to dry/draughty conditions, not in direct sunlight, not directly next to a radiator
  - Motivated to sun themselves: good to offer some sunny areas if possible
- **FLOORSPACE:** 0.5m<sup>2</sup> (775 inches<sup>2</sup>) recommended
  - In a solid-sided tank made of ideally glass or plexiglass (HARD plastic may be okay for the base in the medium-term, but this WILL get damaged over time)
  - Cover with an escape-proof wire to allow for air circulation
- **TANK TOPPER IS IDEAL** – allows you to give the full base as digging space, while keeping the sandbath, water bottle and wheel separated (this also stops them burying them)
  - You can alternatively use a wood bridge to separate an area for this, or put it on platforms, but try to only section off as much space as is absolutely necessary, give them as much digging space as possible
  - Wire floor topper won't cause bumble-foot, but as they have fur on their feet, they may slip and could possibly break toes/feet/legs – you can cover wire floors with cardboard, ceramic tiles or wood bridges, or you can buy/create a wood platform to use instead
- **PLASTIC TOYS NOT SUITABLE** - gerbils are avid chewers and will shred plastic like it's cardboard
- **BEDDING DEPTH:**
  - 25cm (9.8 inches) MINIMUM
  - 40cm (15.7 inches) IDEAL
- Allow **12cm** (4.7 inches) of space on top of bedding for them to stand fully upright

- **SAFE BEDDING:**
  - Paper bedding: soft and holds tunnels well, but gets dusty between cleanings as the gerbils shred it
  - Hemp or Aspen Woodshavings: low dust, but NEEDS hay/straw/paper additionally to be able to hold tunnel structure (Pine, even kiln-dried, may be unsafe)
  - Hay and straw: gerbils like to shred it, and use it as a nesting material
- **UNSAFE BEDDING:**
  - Soil from your garden: can contain potentially harmful chemicals, bacteria or pathogens
  - SawDUST, or any kind of DUST product: can cause respiratory problems in gerbils with sensitive respiratory systems
  - Fluffy bedding products e.g. cotton: can get tangled around their limbs, cutting off circulation and causing injuries, also can cause intestinal impaction if accidentally swallowed
- Should REGULARLY be provided with shred-able nesting materials such as cardboard tubes, PLAIN (no ink) cardboard, plain paper/cardboard packaging
- **CLEANING:**
  - Don't clean too often: if full size (0.5 m<sup>2</sup> with 25cm bedding), and sand bath is provided, enclosures should only need deep cleaning every 2-3 months
  - Cleaning can be stressful for gerbils, so you should keep some USED, but CLEAN bedding and transfer it to their clean enclosure (up to a third)
  - Deep-cleans are essential for removing food leftovers, parasites, fungal spores and dust

- Rough-surfaced object like stone can help wear down their claws – ensure heavy stones are supported on a platform to prevent them injuring the gerbils while digging underneath
- **SANDBATH:** essential for removing oils from their coats and thermoregulation, also provides a toileting area – use sand, NOT DUST (respiratory problems)

**some options for sand:**

- Hamster/gerbil/chinchilla SAND (made from quartz/silica NOT sepiolite/clay, limestone or volcanic ash)
- Reptile sand – NO CALCIUM OR DYES
- Children's play sand – BAKE AND SIEVE FIRST

 **COMPANY** 

- **DON'T HOUSE ALONE:** gerbils are social and may develop depression-like symptoms when housed alone
- **HOWEVER**, the only social structure that forms naturally is the male-female PAIR, larger FAMILY groups with older offspring form TEMPORARILY until the older pups eventually fight and leave, it is therefore **RECOMENDED TO HOUSE IN PAIRS**
  - For groups of 4 or more gerbils, it's advised to separate into pairs
  - For an already established trio, leave together but monitor closely for signs of aggression
  - Pairs can also fight occasionally, but this is much less likely

- **DON'T LIKE MEETING NEW GERBILS**
  - NEVER introduce a gerbil(s) to an already established group – this is likely to end in aggression
  - If you have to introduce a new gerbil to a single gerbil, carefully follow the split tank method (video & guide on channel)
  - No methods of introduction have been scientifically studied, but the most commonly used method is the split tank method
- **DON'T HOUSE WITH OTHER SPECIES:** this is likely to end with one animal getting injured after fighting
- **KEEP PREDATORS AT A SAFE DISTANCE:** It only takes a split second for a cat/dog to snap at your gerbil and they could be gone. House your gerbils in a secure enclosure and if you have them out in a play pen, keep predator animals in another room.
- **HANDLING:** gently get them used to you using a variety of passive and active taming methods (video & guide on channel)

## **BEHAVIOUR**

- **OPPORTUNITIES TO HIDE AND DIG:** gerbils are prey animals so get frightened easily, prefer to hide in self-dug burrows
- **OPPORTUNITIES TO CHEW:** they have continuously growing teeth so need to be provided with lots of things to chew like cardboard, paper, chew toys, and gerbil-safe wood

- **WHEELS:** not strictly necessary, but they do provide enrichment (gerbils will usually run at night) - wheels should have a diameter of around **30cm (11.8 inches)** and have a solid running surface to prevent foot and tail injuries – metal wheels with stationary bars pose additional hazards
- Can also give opportunities to explore by providing access to a playpen (this can be a bathtub or bed) - ideal if you can give them some kind of access ramp to and from their enclosure so they have the option to come and go while supervised

## DIET

- **CONSTANT ACCESS TO WATER:** although they are desert animals, they still need water access, lack of water can be fatal
  - Can be provided in either a **bottle or bowl** or you can give them the option of both
  - These should be cleaned and their water changed regularly (bowls will need cleaning more often)
- Homemade diets that aren't fully calculated may be **IMBALANCED**, an imbalanced diet can cause:
  - Metabolic syndrome (diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity)
  - Dental disease
  - Alopecia (hair loss)
  - Diarrhoea
  - Increased risk of seizures (low magnesium)

- **DO PROVIDE:** good quality, commercial pet food designed FOR GERBILS – different species have different nutritional requirements (video & guide on channel)
- Pelleted foods lack variety and provide no enrichment, but can be mixed 50/50 with muesli for more complete nutrition
- NEW FOODS should be introduced a little at a time to give their systems time to adjust to the changes
- **SCATTER FEED** dry food mix: this provides a really valuable source of enrichment for them
  - Wet food like fruit and vegetables should be provided in a bowl, or during free roaming, to keep bedding clean
- **FRUIT & VEG:** can be provided, but high amounts of SUGAR and MOISTURE can cause diarrhoea – provide small amounts a few times a week – DRIED VEG can be given more regularly because of the reduced moisture content, but even dry fruit should be limited due to the sugar content
- Dried mealworms or crickets make good treats, but because they are high in calories and fat they shouldn't be given too often

## **+ HEALTH & WELFARE +**

- **MONITOR DAILY:** make sure they're eating and drinking normally and not experiencing any diarrhoea - if they are, take them to the vet

- **RED NOSE:** nasal infection causes the nose to become red and inflamed – needs veterinary treatment
  - Can also experience a build up of porphyrin (blood-like substance) around their noses due to environmental problems such as stress, dust, allergies, or problems grooming
  - This is usually remedied by changing whichever problem in the environment was causing it, but the substance can cause the gerbils to scratch their noses, which can lead to infection – so monitor closely and if the nose looks to be getting worse, take them to the vet as soon as possible
- **ONLY TREAT WITH MEDICINES RECOMMENDED BY A VET**
- Changes in behaviour may be one of the first signs of illness, some changes to look out for are:
  - Increased or decreased activity
  - Resting away from their social partners
  - Hunched body posture
  - Lethargy
  - Disrupted grooming
- **STEREOTYPIC DIGGING:** stereotypic behaviour that indicates a lack of a suitable burrow structure – one definition is “digging repetitively in one spot for 12 seconds or more” - can spend up to 22% of their waking time doing this if they don't have a suitable burrow
- **BAR CHEWING:** another stereotypic behaviour, but seen less commonly in gerbils – usually indicates a motivation to escape or early weaning