

Hamsters: Miniature Bears with an Attitude

Our topics for this week are:

- **Physical characteristics of hamsters**
- **Natural behavior of hamsters**
- **How to handle hamsters**

The common pet hamster is the golden (Syrian or teddy bear) hamster which originated in the desert region of Syria. All golden hamsters in captivity are believed to be descendants of one male and two females captured in 1930. Not all are golden in color. New colors have been selectively bred from mutations.

Hamsters have extremely loose skin, virtually no tail, hairless feet, and large cheek pouches for storing food or hiding and transporting valued possessions, including baby hamsters. Both sexes have flank glands used for territorial marking.

Unrelated hamsters to the golden hamster are the Russian hamsters and Chinese dwarf hamsters, which are smaller and less common than the golden hamster. Russian hamsters are usually brown or gray. All have a dorsal stripe the length of their back and hair on their feet. Like the golden hamster, Russian hamsters have cheek pouches. Russian hamsters are more social and less nocturnal.

Hamsters have been used for research on ear diseases, and because of their very short gestation period, they are used for teratogenic studies. They are less affordable for research since they need to be housed individually. Consequently, much more space is required for cages than with other rodents.

A male hamster is called a buck. A female is a doe, and young hamsters are pups.

Natural Behavior of Hamsters

Hamsters are burrowing, nocturnal, desert rodents that are drowsy in the daytime and have poor eyesight, particularly in bright light. They are likely to bite, especially if startled, and are not recommended as pets for children.

In their natural habitat of the desert, adult hamsters primarily live alone in tunnels for cooler temperature and higher humidity than that on the desert's surface. They tolerate cold temperatures well and will go into pseudohibernation if the temperature goes below 48oF and could be mistaken as dead during this time. In their natural habitat, hamsters have not had to evolve with an ability to negotiate cliffs and ledges well. In captivity they are more likely to fall off exam tables than other small mammals. They forage for food at night and then carry it back to their burrow in their cheek pouches. Pet hamsters also like to hide food. Bedding and other areas within enclosure should be routinely checked for stashed rotting food.

Golden hamsters have paired glands in their skin over their flanks. The flank glands, also called hip spots, are more prominent in males that use the gland secretions to mark their territory.

Adult hamsters prefer to live solitary existence except at breeding. Male hamsters are much more docile than females. They should be separated after they are six to 10 weeks old. Females are larger and dominant to males. Females are more aggressive and more likely to fight, especially if pregnant or lactating.

Sexing of hamsters is similar to the rat. The adult male's body protrudes more caudally due to the testicles and the difference is striking. The AG distance is much longer in males. In dwarf species of hamsters, males possess a prevalent scent gland on the midline of their abdomen.

Approaching and Catching

If attempting to sleep, hamsters bury their head under their abdomen which impairs their ability to see, smell, or hear a handler approaching. Capture is best attempted after removing feeders, water bowls, hiding boxes, or other moveable objects in the enclosure. A handler should be sure the hamster is awake before attempting to capture it to prevent startling it. To awaken a hamster, the handler should talk to it or jiggle its cage. Adult female hamsters are usually crankier than males. A nursing female should be captured when away from her litter. Female hamsters can be extremely aggressive when they are nursing.

Gentle hamsters can be captured by cupping with both hands and then supporting their body in the handler's palm or grasping the skin on the back of the neck. They also may be able to be induced to enter a small can or cup and moved after covering the opening.

Handling for Routine Care and Management

For the best physical restraint, the handler must do a full body scruff hold. The hamster is covered with one hand while pinning the head between the thumb and index finger, then without releasing the skin behind the neck, it is grasped with thumb and index finger and the skin of the back with other fingers and heel of the hand. Caution is required to not gather the skin too tightly near the head. Too much tension on the skin around the eyes can cause a prolapse of an eyeball, that is, an eye to pop out of its socket.

When possible, restraint should be avoided if the cheek pouches contain food. Hamsters may aspirate cheek pouch materials if scruffed with their pouches full.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Mature hamsters like to be alone and sleep during the day.**
- 2. Hamsters move food in their cheek pouches and hide it.**
- 3. The skin of hamsters is very loose making restraint difficult.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.