**YVCipedia SMALL MAMMAL**

Gerbil Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

Gerbils (*Mongolian gerbil*, *Meriones unguiculatus*) are small, social desert rodents originally native to Mongolia’s arid regions. They typically weigh around 2–3 oz (60–90 g) and live 3–4 years in good care. Known for being gentle, inquisitive, and remarkably clean, gerbils are active during daytime and dusk. They form strong bonds with cage mates and handlers, and they rarely bite when handled calmly.

## **Housing & Environment**

Gerbils live best in pairs or small same-sex groups to support their social nature. They need a deep enclosure—such as a tank or bin cage—with solid floors and at least 6 inches of bedding for burrowing. Wire-topped cages with secure lids help ensure ventilation while preventing escapes; gerbils can squeeze through small openings.

**Housing Highlights:**

* **Social groups**: Ideally keep at least two gerbils together
* **Enclosure**: 10 gal tank per pair or larger; solid base
* **Bedding depth**: Minimum 6 inches (15 cm) of paper or aspen bedding
* **Ventilation**: Secure wire lid preferred over tunnels
* **Enrichment**: Hideouts, tunnels, wooden chew blocks, dig boxes

## **Diet & Nutrition**

As omnivores adapted to sparse environments, gerbils benefit from a balanced diet of commercial gerbil blocks or pellets. Supplements—like small amounts of seeds, grains, or fresh vegetables—can be offered. Hay is optional but can encourage natural foraging behavior. Always provide fresh water in a sipper bottle, and clean it daily.

**Diet Highlights:**

* **Pellets/blocks**: Staple commercial gerbil diet - we prefer Oxbow at YVC
* **Treats**: Limited small amounts of seeds, whole grain, veggies
* **Hay**: Optional for enrichment
* **Water**: Fresh daily via sipper bottle

## **Healthcare**

A veterinary exam after acquisition and annually thereafter helps monitor common gerbil health issues such as overgrown teeth, respiratory infections, facial or ovarian tumors, tail injuries, epilepsy, and tyzzer’s disease. Gerbils are sensitive to handling, so support their body completely and always lift from underneath.

**Health Highlights:**

* **Vet visits**: First exam soon after adoption; annual checkups recommended
* **Watch for**: Overgrown incisors, sneezing, head tilt, skin lumps, seizures, lethargy
* **Common issues**: Dental overgrowth, respiratory infections, tumors (especially in older females), epilepsy, tail-tip autotomy, tyzzer’s disease
* **Handling caution**: Support full body; never pick up by tail

## **Behavior & Handling**

Gerbils are intelligent explorers with a preference for companionship. They exhibit playful behaviors like sand “washes” and tunnel digging. Gentle, short handling sessions help build trust—especially during their awake hours (daylight to early evening). They enjoy small, enclosed toys like tubes and hide boxes but should not be housed with more boisterous rodents.

**Behavior Highlights:**

* **Handling**: Scoop from below; no tail-grabbing
* **Social needs**: Keep with peers—solitude leads to stress
* **Communication**: Thumping signals alarm; chirping and play wrestling are normal
* **Play**: Provide supervised, escape-proof time outside the cage

## **Grooming & Enrichment**

Gerbils self-groom frequently and do not require baths. Provide a shallow dust bath occasionally if coat grooming appears impaired. Keep the enclosure clean but avoid over-cleaning, which can stress them. Enrichment such as tunnels, chew toys, and dig boxes support their natural burrowing instincts and mental stimulation.

**Enrichment Highlights:**

* **Dust bathing**: 1–2 times weekly, in shallow bowl
* **Bedding maintenance**: Spot-clean daily; full replacement weekly
* **Toys**: Rotating wooden chews, tubes, safe natural logs
* **Dig box**: Provide sand or shredded paper for burrowing

## **Fun Facts & FAQs**

* **Epilepsy** occurs in ~20–50% of pet gerbils, often triggered by handling or stress; seizures are usually brief and non-fatal.
* Gerbils rarely bite—when they do, it’s often due to stress; slow, gentle handling helps avoid this.
* **Thumping** is used to alert cage-mates of danger; observe body posture and behavior for clues.
* **Tail-tip detachment** can occur if pulled—though it doesn’t regrow, it typically heals without issue.
* Gerbils live in family groups and thrive when housed with peers—they can become depressed if kept alone.

### **Supplies Checklist**

* Enclosure: minimum 20 gal tank or larger with solid base
* Clean paper or aspen bedding (≥6” deep)
* Secure wire lid for ventilation
* Gerbil blocks or pellets; small treats
* Water sipper bottle
* Hideouts, tunnels, wooden chew toys
* Shallow dish for dust bath
* Carrier for veterinary visits

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