

Common Gerbil Ailments

The best advice is to consult your vet if you think your gerbil may be ill.

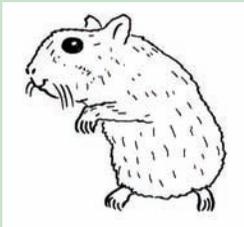
Seizures: Gerbils have a tendency to develop seizures which may be initiated by fright, handling or a new environment. These can vary from mild to severe but do not appear to have long-term effects. Frequent handling when young and a stable environment can help suppress these.

Tail sloughing: Caused by improper handling. The skinless tail will die off and drop away.

Tyzers disease: This is a most serious disease caused by bacteria. Symptoms include ruffled fur, tiredness, hunched posture, lack of appetite and diarrhoea. Seek veterinary advice urgently as this can be fatal.

Sore nose and eyes: This can be caused by abrasions from coarse bedding or rough surfaces. Make sure the gerbil's home is free of unsuitable bedding materials and toys. If the problem persists, consult a vet as it may become infected.

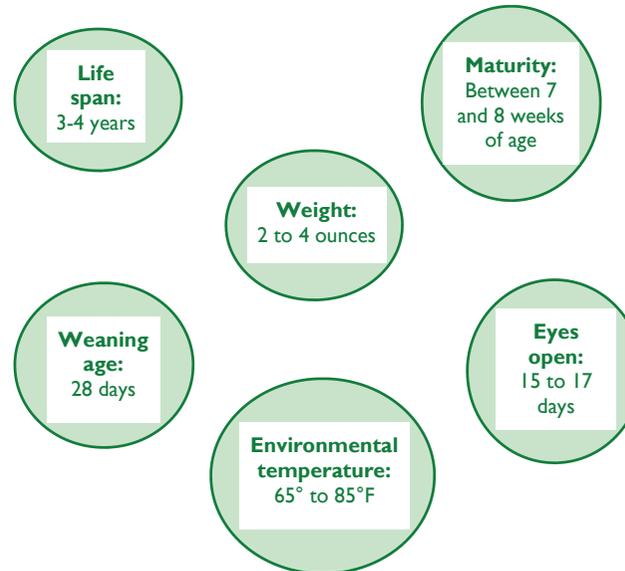
Overgrown teeth: Gerbils need materials such as wood blocks to gnaw on as their teeth grow continually. Consult a vet who can cut them back.



Gerbil Facts

Gerbils are small rodents, between rats and mice in size. In the wild they live in the hot deserts and semi-deserts of Africa and Asia where they inhabit underground tunnels. Their burrows are elaborate with many entrances and areas for nesting and storing food.

Because they live in a hot climate, they produce little urine and waste, and are therefore virtually odourless.



The Environmental Animal Sanctuary and Education (EASE) is a registered charity (no. 1089160) which promotes aspects of the human/companion animal relationship. Our services include the provision of a Preparing for Pet Loss programme and education in animal welfare. For more information about our work, contact:

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**Environmental Animal
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The EASE Guide to Caring for GERBILS



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Gerbils are clever, alert, very active and friendly animals that will keep their owner entertained. They are relatively easy to care for but need regular attention, and their low purchase cost must be considered in relation to the potential vet fees.

A Home for your Gerbils

A popular home for gerbils is an aquarium as this is easily cleaned, the gerbils are easily viewed, and the glass will resist their gnawing and scratching. Wire cages are best avoided as the gerbils can injure themselves by catching their feet in the holes, and their bedding will also easily be spilled to surrounding areas. A 10-gallon tank is a good size for two gerbils, allowing an extra 5-gallons' tank space for each additional gerbil. Make sure that the lid fits securely whilst allowing adequate ventilation - wire mesh is an ideal material for this.

The floor of the gerbilarium needs to be covered with plenty of material for burrowing in. Potting compost, straw or hay can be used, or wood shavings but NOT cedar or pine which can cause respiratory problems and liver damage. Use plenty of bedding material, filling up to about one-third of the height of the tank. Your gerbils will need a sleeping area, possibly a wooden box or maybe a flower pot, filled with plain, white kitchen paper or soft hay.

Provide some toys such as empty kitchen or toilet rolls for the gerbils to run through and explore. Wooden blocks to gnaw will help keep their teeth healthy. Keep your gerbils' home out of direct sunlight and draughts; and tidy it up every day, giving it a thorough clean every month.



Sexing your Gerbils

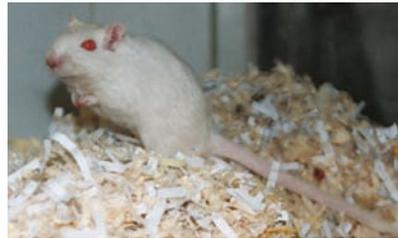
There are several ways of determining the sex of your gerbils: firstly the distance between the anal opening and the genitals is greater in males than in females, and also the nipples are more obvious in females. Adult males have a large bulge at the base of the tail which is the scrotum and this is completely absent in females. If you are in any doubt, consult a vet.

Food and Drink for your Gerbils

A mixed diet including fresh, washed fruit and vegetables with various grains will help keep your gerbils healthy. Sunflower seeds and peanuts should only be given in moderation as they are fattening. These can be fed by hand which is also a good way of taming the gerbils. Pre-mixed gerbil food which provides the right balance of proteins, minerals, vitamins and bulk can be bought from local pet shops.

They also like occasional apple, carrot and lettuce. Any remaining pieces should be removed after a few hours so that they do not rot in the cage. You can use a ceramic bowl for feeding or simply place the food on the bedding; the gerbils may well bury it and come back for it later.

Clean, fresh water must always be available in a drip-feed bottle with a metal spout, and this must be regularly cleaned out and refilled.



Handling your Gerbils

After your gerbils have had time to settle into their new home, let them get used to your hand by placing it in the tank and letting them come up and sniff you. When they are used to that, put a few sunflower seeds or peanuts into your palm and let them come up and eat them, running over your hand and up your arm.

To pick one up, let the gerbil come into your palm and gently place your other hand over its back to prevent it jumping off, which they are inclined to do. Try not to handle them more than necessary as this can cause stress. NEVER pick a gerbil up by the tail as it can easily break.

Once tame, they are very friendly and will climb onto your shoulder, running across to the other shoulder, up and down your arm and perching on your elbow for a good look around. It is best to do this sitting down on a chair or bed so they don't get hurt should they fall.

Gerbils

Gerbils are highly social animals that should never be kept alone. They are burrowing and digging animals, active both day and night with periods of rest in between when they should be left in peace. They are relatively free of naturally occurring infectious diseases and rarely bite or fight.

Gerbils are very popular pets that vary in colour from the original colour, agouti, which is mixed brown and a light brown on white chest and abdomen. Other colours include black, white, cinnamon and cream.



Gerbil Body Language

Gerbils are very interactive and will chase and play with each other. They are very social and their body language reflects the fact that they live in colonies and are territorial, to the point of becoming quite aggressive especially with strangers.

Thumping: Gerbils make a rhythmic thumping with their back feet as a warning when alarmed or to attract a mate.

Marking: Gerbils have a scent gland on their stomach which they rub against everything in their territory, including each other.

Digging: This is perfectly normal and is the gerbils natural instinct to dig, even though it may not be getting anywhere.

Fighting: There are two types, play and serious. Play fights are frequent and involve pouncing on each other, wild chasing and boxing. If it is serious, the gerbil may lose weight, have bite marks and even stop sleeping in the nest. This can become quite violent and is a sign that they may need to be separated.