

Gerbil – Basic Care

- Gerbils have a low occurrence of Natural Disease.
- Well known for ease of handling, mild temperament, and adaptability to environmental changes.
- Also well known as the “jird” or “desert rat.”
- With the desert as a natural habitat, can withstand rapid temperature changes from 0° - 100°F and extremes of humidity.
- Light cycles have little effect on their breeding habits.
- Gerbils utilize water very efficiently; they excrete only 3-8 drops of urine daily.
- Are unique by generally forming monogamous pairs and mate for life. Attempts to separate pairs to mate with another animal are usually unsuccessful and can result in fighting and death.
- Breeding pairs are usually established before puberty.
- Are intensely curious, gentle and docile by nature.
- Live in colonies in their natural environment.
- Greet by licking each others mouth.
- Excellent jumpers and thump with hind limbs when frightened.
- Minimum cage sizes are not specified in the Animal Welfare Regulation and The Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals, but have the same requirements as rats and mice in terms of housing.
- Enrichment should be provided unless specified in protocol and approved by the IACUC.
- Examples of enrichment:
 - Balls
 - Nesting material
 - Group housing
 - Plastic tubing
 - Wood sticks
 - Food treats
- Gerbils are very aggressive chewers and will destroy enrichment devices quickly.
- Gerbils have “cyclic activity” with intermittent periods of high-level activity followed by periods of rest. This activity cycle continues during periods of light and dark.
- Should be fed a high quality commercially prepared diet that are balanced for proper nutrition.
- Food and water should be given ad libitum.
- Should be housed on contact bedding for natural burrowing behaviors.
- To pick up a gerbil, gently grasp the base of the tail and lift from the cage.
- Do not pick up by the tip of the tail, the tip is very fragile and the skin may tear off and expose the vertebrate, surgical amputation may then be necessary.
- Another method for handling is to cup both hands under the gerbil and then gently lift up out of the cage.
- Restraint is similar to that used for a mouse. Pick up by base of the tail and grasp the loose skin at the back of the neck with the thumb and index finger of the other hand with the back of the gerbil in the palm of your hand, grasp the tail with the little finger.
- For more specific species information, including physiologic data, husbandry and breeding requirements, or procedural information please contact the Office of Laboratory Animal Care (865-974-5634).