

Basic Care – Hamsters

- Hamsters are the most nocturnal (active at night) of the common laboratory rodents.
- Will bite when startled, especially when suddenly awakened.
- Frequent, careful handling help make them gentle and easy to handle.
- Compared to most other laboratory rodents, hamsters are aggressive. Females usually dominate males, and larger hamsters of either sex usually dominate smaller ones.
- Hamsters may hibernate if the room temperature drops to 41°F, large amounts of food are provided, or the light cycle shortens.
- Like to burrow; contact bedding should be used.
- Adept at escaping from cages; cage tops must be secured firmly.
- Tend to be solitary but will tolerate pair or group housing (no more than 4 to a cage) if grouped together at an early age.
- Are highly dependent on their sense of smell in most activities. When mating or marking their territory, pheromones are produced from the flank gland and genital area.
- Enrichment should be provided unless specified in protocol and approved by IACUC.
- Examples of enrichment:
 - Food treats
 - Crawling balls
 - Hamster igloos
 - Tunnels
- Hamsters have a unique cheek pouch which is used for storing food, bedding, nesting material, and to hide neonates when the mother is frightened.
- Susceptible to proliferative ileitis (wet tail) which has a high prevalence and mortality rate.
- Should be fed a high quality, nutritionally complete, commercially prepared rodent chow.
- Food and water should be fed ad libitum
- Hamsters are fastidious animals, usually choosing one corner of the cage for food storage and another for waste.
- Most easily moved by grasping the loose skin across the shoulders or by scooping them up with both hands.
- To restrain a hamster, place it on a flat surface and gently press the palm of your hand against the hamsters back, keeping your fingers straight. Then curl your fingers and thumb around opposite sides of the animal gathering as much loose skin as possible. With the loose skin bunched tightly in the hand, the hamster will not be able to turn its head and bite.
- Minimum cage sizes are specific in the regulations and The Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals. Exceptions must be approved by the IACUC.
- 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).