Gerbil Care Guide

15-page illustrated guide | Social pairs, deep bedding, diet, sand baths and health



Gerbils are active social diggers. A compatible same-sex pair, deep burrowing bedding, safe chewing enrichment and a clean, dry habitat support natural behavior.

A practical, species-specific guide for responsible ownership in the United States. Use it alongside an experienced small-mammal veterinarian and current local rules.

1 | Is a gerbil right for your home?

Gerbils are active, curious and often easiest to observe rather than cuddle. They enjoy digging, chewing, nesting and social contact. Pet gerbils commonly live about 2.5–4 years, so prepare for daily care and veterinary costs across that lifespan.

A gerbil is a poor choice for an owner expecting a quiet, low-effort animal in a small cage. The habitat needs depth for burrowing, secure sides, good airflow and chew-resistant furnishings. Gerbils are typically most active in short periods throughout the day and night.

– Plan for an established compatible pair, daily checks and frequent spot cleaning.

– Find a veterinarian experienced with small mammals before adoption.

– Keep children supervised and protect the enclosure from cats and dogs.

2 | Social pairing and choosing gerbils

Gerbils are social and generally should not live alone. A same-sex pair from one litter or an already bonded rescue pair is often easiest. Gerbils form strong social bonds; casually adding a stranger to an established home can trigger territorial fighting. Use expert advice and a controlled introduction method if a companion is needed.

Ask the rescue or seller to confirm sex, age, group history, health and diet. Look for bright eyes, clean fur, normal breathing, steady movement and no tail injuries. Do not handle a gerbil by the tail; the skin can be seriously injured.

– Do not mix sexes unless breeding is intentional and professionally planned.

– Provide a backup enclosure in case a pair needs safe separation after a fight.

– Avoid separating bonded animals without medical or behavior guidance.

3 | Habitat: tank, ventilation and depth

A spacious glass tank or sturdy enclosure with a secure ventilated mesh lid can support deep bedding and burrowing. Merck describes a rough volume guideline of about 5 gallons per gerbil, but more space is better; plan a roomy habitat that allows bedding depth, hides, feeding space and a solid wheel. Avoid wire floors and flimsy plastic that can be chewed through.

Fill a substantial portion of the habitat with safe paper-based bedding so gerbils can dig and create tunnels. Add a nesting area, stable platforms, cardboard tubes, ceramic hides and untreated wood for chewing. Keep the home dry, secure and away from direct sun, drafts and excessive humidity.

– Check that the lid locks securely and ventilation remains unobstructed.

– Avoid cedar, untreated pine, dusty substrate and cotton nesting fluff.

– Place heavy items on the solid base before adding bedding to reduce collapse risk.

4 | Bedding, nest building and cleaning

Gerbils use bedding to dig, tunnel, hoard food and rest. Use low-dust paper bedding and safe plain paper strips for nesting. Avoid loose fibers that can wrap around toes. Some owners use a safe bedding mix; ask a veterinarian if skin or respiratory problems appear.

Spot-clean wet or spoiled areas, refresh water daily and remove fresh food before it spoils. A full clean should not erase every familiar scent at once; save some clean dry bedding and return it after cleaning. Merck recommends regular thorough cleaning, at least every two to three weeks, adjusted for enclosure size and soiling.

– Watch tunnels and platforms for collapse or sharp edges.

– Clean bowls and water tips when refilling; verify bottle flow daily.

– Do not use scented sprays or strong disinfectant residue in the enclosure.

5 | Diet and water

Feed a complete commercial gerbil pellet or balanced formulated diet. Seed-heavy mixes can encourage selective feeding and an unbalanced ration. Follow the product's measured feeding direction and your veterinarian's advice; avoid free-feeding high-fat sunflower or pumpkin seeds. Small treats can be offered sparingly.

Keep clean water available every day in a bottle or stable bowl. Gerbils may drink relatively little, but a functioning water source must always be present. Check for leaks, blockage or bedding in the nozzle. Introduce fresh foods carefully, in tiny portions, and remove leftovers promptly.

– Do not use rabbit or guinea-pig food as a complete gerbil diet.

– Avoid chocolate, caffeine, alcohol, sticky candy and salty or greasy foods.

– Hoarding dry food is normal; remove wet or moldy hidden food.

6 | Chewing, wheels and enrichment

Gerbils need safe opportunities to chew because their incisors grow continuously. Offer cardboard boxes, plain paper tubes, untreated chew wood and safe forage scatter. A solid-surface wheel sized so the animal can run without arching can add exercise. Avoid wire rungs or gaps that can catch feet or tails.

Change some toys and tunnels periodically, but keep familiar nest areas. Climbing structures should be stable and low enough to reduce fall injuries. Avoid plastic items that can be chewed into sharp pieces or swallowed.

– Provide chew-safe materials daily and replace them when damaged.

– Create several routes and hiding places to support pair choice and reduce crowding.

– No exercise ball is needed; a secure play area is safer under close supervision.

7 | Sand baths and grooming

Gerbils use regular sand baths to help maintain their coats. Offer a shallow, stable dish with a suitable dust-free bath sand; avoid very fine dust that may irritate lungs. Supervise at first, remove heavily soiled sand and keep the bath dry. Sand bathing is not the same as bathing in water.

Most gerbils groom themselves. Check fur, ears, eyes, feet, tail and teeth during routine observation. Do not pull a gerbil from its tail or restrain it by the scruff for routine grooming. If you notice hair loss, sores, a dirty coat, overgrown teeth or a tail injury, contact a veterinarian.

– Never dunk or routinely bathe a gerbil in water.

– Use soft, low-stress handling and allow the animal to retreat to a hide.

– Ask a veterinarian before using parasite powders, sprays or medications.

8 | Handling and taming

Start with a quiet voice and let the gerbils investigate your hand. Offer a small treat from an open palm. To lift, scoop the body with both hands and keep the animal low over a safe surface. Gerbils are quick; do not handle them high above the floor or over an open doorway.

Children should sit on the floor with an adult present. Do not chase a gerbil around the tank or wake a sleeping animal. A transport cup or carrier can be safer than grabbing a nervous gerbil during enclosure cleaning or a vet visit.

– Never lift by the tail; tail skin can detach and cause severe injury.

– Keep cats, dogs and loud activity away during handling.

– Short calm sessions repeated over days are better than forced restraint.

9 | Veterinary care and prevention

Arrange a first check soon after adoption and ask a veterinarian experienced with gerbils how often wellness visits should occur; an annual exam is a practical baseline for a healthy pet. Bring enclosure photos, food packaging, weight records and a fresh stool sample if requested.

Preventive care includes correct diet, clean water, safe chewing, dry bedding and daily observation. No routine vaccines are generally given to pet gerbils. Use prescribed medicines only; never give human drugs or leftover antibiotics.

– Ask a clinic if it treats gerbils and can provide urgent care after hours.

– Keep the pair’s medical and identification information together.

– Request advice on dental checks, nail care and safe travel.

10 | Early illness signs

Call a veterinarian if a gerbil becomes inactive, hunched, loses appetite or weight, appears dehydrated, has rough or matted fur, changes urine or droppings, develops discharge from eyes, ears or nose, or breathes with effort. Diarrhea, wounds, drooling, swelling or a limp also require prompt professional advice.

Small mammals can hide illness until it is advanced. Do not wait for a symptom to persist for days. If breathing is difficult, the animal collapses, or a tail injury exposes tissue, seek urgent veterinary care. Keep the gerbil warm and quiet for transport.

Daily observation is essential: changes in appetite, activity, fur, breathing, urine or droppings can signal illness.

11 | Approximate U.S. costs

Costs vary by location and equipment. The animal itself may cost little, but a roomy tank, deep substrate, secure lid, hides, wheel, carrier and veterinary exam add up. Online estimates vary; use local rescue and clinic prices as the most useful planning basis.

Budget item	Planning range (USD)
Adoption fee	About $10–$50 per gerbil
Tank, lid, wheel, hides and carrier	About $150–$400+ initial setup
Food, bedding and chew items	About $25–$60/month for a pair
Routine veterinary exam	Often $50–$150+ per visit
Annual care budget	About $300–$800+ per pair
Emergency reserve	Several hundred dollars or more

Price the habitat and veterinary access before adopting. The gerbil’s purchase fee is usually the smallest expense.

12 | Children and other household pets

Gerbils can be enjoyable to watch and may learn to accept gentle hand-feeding, but they are fast and delicate. An adult should supervise all handling and remain responsible for daily food, water, cleaning and veterinary decisions. They may not be ideal for a child who wants to carry a pet frequently.

Cats, dogs, snakes and ferrets must be kept away from the habitat and supervised play area. Even a secured cage may not prevent stress from a predator watching, pawing or striking at the enclosure. Never house gerbils with hamsters, mice, rats, guinea pigs or rabbits.

– Use a secure lid and stable stand that cannot be tipped over.

– Keep the habitat in a quiet family area, not a kitchen or noisy entertainment space.

– Wash hands after handling animals, bedding or equipment.

13 | Travel, sitter and emergency preparation

Gerbils are usually best left in a familiar habitat with a knowledgeable sitter for short trips. A sitter should check water flow, food, temperature and activity daily. For a move or vet visit, use a secure ventilated carrier with a small amount of familiar bedding and nesting material.

Avoid direct sun, high heat, loud music and leaving the carrier in a parked car. Ask the veterinarian about safe transport for cold weather, medication or illness. Keep a backup water bottle and carrier available.

– Leave written feeding and cleaning instructions with the sitter.

– Provide the clinic number, emergency address and authorization details.

– Do not transport loose in a pocket, box or open container.

Sources and further reading

This is an original educational guide, not a reproduction of the requested book. The supplied eBay item number was used as the reference, but the listing's title, author and edition could not be independently confirmed. Verify book details directly on the listing.

For individualized decisions, consult a veterinarian experienced in gerbils. Housing, diet and health needs vary with age, condition and pair compatibility.

– User-supplied eBay listing

– Merck Veterinary Manual: Providing a Home for a Gerbil

– Merck Veterinary Manual: Routine Health Care of Gerbils

– Merck Veterinary Manual: Disorders and Diseases of Gerbils

– Merck Veterinary Manual: Selecting a Gerbil

– VCA Animal Hospitals: Owning a Pet Gerbil

– RSPCA: Gerbil health

– University of Washington: Environmental Enrichment for Gerbils