

Not only is your veterinarian best qualified to evaluate the health of your new companion, but he/she can advise you about parasite control, nutrition, sterilization, socialization, training, grooming, and other care that may be necessary to ensure the welfare of your pet. Your veterinarian should continue to examine your pet rodent at least once a year to detect any emerging health problems. Early diagnosis and treatment of disease is more likely to cost less and result in a favorable outcome.

### **When you acquire a pet**

*You accept responsibility for the health and welfare of another living thing. You are also responsible for your pet's impact on your family, friends, and community. A pet will be part of your life for many years. Invest the time and effort necessary to make your years together happy ones. When you choose a pet, you are promising to care for it for its entire life. Choose wisely, keep your promise, and enjoy one of life's most rewarding experiences!*



### *Additional Tips on Caring for Your Pet Rodent*

- Bedding is an important part of caring for your pet. To prevent cage odors use absorbent bedding and change it regularly. Some bedding should be avoided because it may be toxic for small animals; consult your veterinarian before you choose.
- Rodents should always be handled with calm, slow movements and a safe "retreat" area should be provided in their cage.
- For your pet's supervised time outside of its cage, create a safe, cleanable roaming area on a desk or by using a large container or pen. Leashes may be used with larger rodents.
- Before purchasing your pet rodent, consult a veterinarian familiar with the species and join a club or group to learn from experienced owners.

*For more information, visit,*  
American Veterinary Medical Association

[www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org)

Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians

[www.aemv.org](http://www.aemv.org)



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# Selecting a Pet Rodent



*Brought to you by your veterinarian and the  
American Veterinary Medical Association*

*Pets are an important part of the American household. Your pet-owning experience will be most enjoyable if you carefully consider which pet best suits your family, home, and lifestyle. Unfulfilled expectations are a leading cause of pet relinquishment, so make an informed decision. Take time, involve your family, and give careful consideration to the following questions if you are thinking about a rodent as a pet.*

### What's special about pet rodents?

Rodents such as hamsters, mice, gerbils, and guinea pigs are examples of “pocket pets,” so-called because they are smaller and their care is less demanding compared with that required for many other types of pets. For these reasons, they can make good first pets for young children.

### What choices do you have?

#### Hamsters

The most common pet hamsters are Syrian or golden hamsters, but albino (white with pink eyes) hamsters are also available. Hamsters housed in pairs or groups may fight, so they are usually housed alone.

#### Gerbils

Similar in size to hamsters, gerbils are more active and social. Unlike hamsters, gerbils are happier when housed as a pair or in a small group. Potential owners should be aware that purchasing and keeping gerbils may be illegal in some states.

#### Mice

While mice can be tame and entertaining, they are slightly more nervous than hamsters or gerbils. Female mice do well in pairs or small groups, but males will often fight with each other. The most common mice found in pet stores are albino, but there are also “fancy” mice that come in a variety of colors.

#### Rats

Rats are social and thrive in same-sex pairs. They are larger and easier to handle than some smaller rodents, rarely bite, and often become strongly bonded to their owners. Rats come in a variety of colors and require a larger cage and more attention than smaller rodents.

#### Guinea pigs

The largest of the rodents commonly kept as pets, their size and gentle temperament make guinea pigs popular. They are social, unlikely to bite, and do well in same sex pairs. They can also be more vocal than other rodents.



### What are some characteristics of pet rodents?

- Compared to dogs and cats, pet rodents have a shorter life span. Young children should be made aware of this so that the “sudden death” of their pet isn’t shocking and upsetting. Average life spans are 2-3 years for hamsters and gerbils, 1-3 years for mice, 2-4 years for rats, and 5-7 years for guinea pigs.
- Housing is a critical component of owning a healthy and safe pet rodent. Rats and guinea pigs require larger cages than those typically sold in pet stores. All rodents should have adequate room to move around and exercise. Exercise wheels can be a wonderful source of activity and stimulation for smaller rodents. Cages must have secure latches because pet rodents can be expert escape artists. Secure housing is particularly important if your family has other pets. If you let your pet outside of its cage, supervise it at all times.
- Rodents love to chew! Providing safe chewing materials is important for their physical and mental well-being.
- Guinea pigs require additional time and attention from their owners. They have more demanding dietary needs than other rodents, requiring fresh hay and vegetables. They also require supplemental vitamin C because they do not produce their own and must get it from their diet. Long-haired guinea pigs should be brushed regularly to prevent tangled hair.

### Who will care for your pet rodent?

As its owner, you will be responsible for your rodent’s food, shelter, companionship, exercise, and physical and mental health for the rest of its life. Although children should be involved in caring for a pet, it is unrealistic to expect them to be solely responsible. An adult must be willing, able, and available to supervise.

### Does a pet rodent fit your lifestyle?

Because they are housed in cages, pet rodents can easily be kept in apartments, condominiums, and houses. Although rodents require less maintenance than many other pets, they still need your commitment of time and care.

Rodents are well known for their ability to produce large numbers of babies. Purchasing and breeding a pet rodent for the sole purpose of allowing children to witness the birth process is not responsible pet ownership. If your female rodent becomes pregnant, it is your responsibility to find good homes for its offspring. In addition, some females may harm or eat their offspring and this may be traumatic for children. To avoid the problem of accidental breeding, do not mix males and females in the same cage.

Hamsters, mice, and rats are nocturnal, which means they are more active at night. This can be frustrating for children who want to play with their pet during its normal sleeping time. In addition, the noise created by a rodent moving around in its cage during the night may

disrupt sleep for some people. Hamsters, mice, and rats may be difficult to wake up during the day and are more likely to be grumpy if disturbed. Since gerbils are more active during the day, they may better fit into a child’s schedule. Guinea pigs can be active during the day or night.



Keep in mind that if there are children in the family, they should be taught how to correctly handle their pets; for example, rodents should NEVER be picked up by their tails!

### Can you afford a pet rodent?

While rodents may be purchased or adopted relatively inexpensively, you should anticipate additional costs for housing, food, accessories and veterinary care throughout your pet’s life.

### Where can you get a pet rodent?

Most pet rodents are purchased from pet stores. Other sources for pet rodents include reputable breeders, rescue groups, and animal shelters. Always inquire about the return policy in the event your pet is found to be unhealthy.

### What should you look for in a healthy pet rodent?

Avoid animals that appear ill. Trying to nurse a sick rodent back to health after acquiring it rarely works. If the environment your potential pet is living in is dirty, smelly, or otherwise suspect, do not purchase or adopt an animal from there.

A healthy pet rodent should have no discharge from the eyes, nose, or mouth. The animal should appear frisky and attempt to run and resist handling to some degree, but should not panic when being handled. No coughing, sneezing, or wheezing should be evident. Be sure to examine the animal’s tail area. It should be dry and free of diarrhea or caked-on stool. This is especially important to check when purchasing or adopting young hamsters; baby hamsters may have a disease called “wet tail” which can be fatal.

### What must you do to prepare for your pet rodent?

Make sure your pet’s cage contains fresh bedding, food, and water and that there is plenty of space for exercise (e.g., wheels for appropriate species). Nesting materials are necessary for all pet rodents. Guinea pigs need a cave-like area for sleeping.

A veterinarian should examine any pet rodent within 48 hours of its acquisition. This physical exam is critical to detect signs of disease and to help new pet owners learn about proper care. Since many problems are caused by misinformation and improper care, the first veterinary visit will help prevent well-intentioned owners from making mistakes that ultimately contribute to an animal’s early death.