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CARING FOR YOUR HAMSTER

HOUSING: There are 2 types of hamsters commonly sold as pets. Most are Golden Hamsters, also known as Syrian Hamsters. These have many hair colors and may be short or long haired. Golden hamsters are native to hot arid regions, and do not tolerate cool temperatures; they should be kept above 70°F as they may become unconscious at temperatures below 65°F. Dwarf Hamsters are smaller, with short greyish-brown hair on top and white hair below. Dwarf hamsters often tolerate cool well, but usually are kept at normal room temperature (70-72°F). Hamsters may be housed in wood or wire cages with solid floors. Avoid wire floors as feet may become caught and bones broken as the pet tries to free itself. Wire floors also tend to cause sores on the feet. Provide a thick layer of good bedding such as recycled paper, straw, or hardwood shavings (use aspen, not cedar or pine). Hamsters are often aggressive if housed together, and may need to be kept separate to prevent fighting, especially with males. Hamsters may be friendly pets when handled regularly, but some individuals fail to tame well and are prone to biting, especially when first awakened. Golden hamsters tend to be less aggressive than Siberian dwarf hamsters, and therefore are probably better pets. With good care a hamster may live to 2-5 years old.

FEEDING: The bulk of the diet should be hamster pellets (*not a seed & fruit mix*), and offer grass hay such as timothy. Avoid alfalfa hay except with babies, and pregnant or nursing females who need extra protein & calcium that alfalfa provides. Pellets may be fed free choice unless obesity occurs; hay is always fed free choice. Pellets provide balanced nutrition; hay provides roughage for intestinal health. In general fresh green leafy veggies may be offered daily, but should be limited to less than 20% (1/5) of the diet. Avoid veggies in the cabbage family (kale, cabbage, Bok Choy, broccoli, cauliflower, collards, Brussels sprouts) as they can cause bloating. Items high in sugars (fruit, baby carrots, tomatoes, corn, etc) or high in protein (seeds, oats, alfalfa,) should be especially limited as they easily upset the bowel. Fresh water should always be available. Ball bearing bottles are cleaner and not as easily spilled as bowls. Clean the cage, food and water bowls regularly.

COMMON DISEASES:

Dental diseases: Hamsters have constantly growing front teeth (incisors), and occasionally develop overgrown front teeth for a variety of reasons. Chewing on hard objects such as wood or metal may twist and damage the teeth and increase the risk of overgrowth. Incisor overgrowth may be visible as long crooked tusk-like projections from the mouth. Treatment of tooth problems often involves trimming the overgrown teeth back to normal length, and/or extracting any infected teeth. Offer soft chew toys such as ink-free cardboard instead of wood to chew on; this may minimize damage to the incisors. If the incisors overgrow severely, the hamster may be unable to eat. Fasting hamsters need immediate care, as they can die from bowel upsets with inadequate roughage intake.

“Wet Tail” (Bowel Upsets): Intestinal upsets are a major cause of death in pet hamsters. Signs may include loss of appetite, diarrhea, and lethargy, but some pets show only one of these signs. Hamsters have sensitive intestines, and almost any stress can cause this disease. Sudden diet changes, sugary treats, parasites, & some antibiotics (especially penicillin) can cause a sudden and often fatal diarrhea or bloat. There are contagious infections that can also cause ‘wet tail’, usually seen while hamsters are housed in groups in the pet store or breeder facility. Bowel disease is unpredictable; mild cases may have slightly soft stool for days and survive, but severe cases may develop depression and shock within hours and die before diarrhea develops. Prevention is via feeding a high roughage diet with minimal use of sweet items such as fruit; also minimize high protein items (oats, seeds, nuts, alfalfa). Avoid sudden diet changes, and restrict vegies to less than 20% of the diet. Avoid vegies in the cabbage family. Treatment of bowel upsets varies with severity but may include bacterial supplements such as milk free acidophilus, feeding roughage (force feeding if necessary), intestinal stimulants such as Reglan or Propulsid, anti-diarrheal medications such as kaolin-pectin or blackberry leaves, and injectable fluids in severe cases. Some patients need antibiotics. Prompt medical care is essential whenever a hamster is lethargic, or is not eating, or has diarrhea, or feels cold to the touch. Sick hamsters may die within hours, but many cases of bowel upset are curable if caught in time.

Mites (Demodex): These are common skin parasites but often produce no symptoms unless the hamster is weakened from other disease. Mites are microscopic, burrow deep in the skin, and when numerous cause intense itching, flaking, and hair loss. Severe cases may develop large scabs or sores due to intense scratching and biting at the skin. Mites are hard to kill but respond to treatment with ivermectin (oral or injectable) daily for 6-8 weeks. Lyme sulfur dip may help when applied twice weekly for 6-8 weeks but is more labor-intensive and must be applied thoroughly. Cleaning the cage weekly when treating the mites may help reduce reinfestation, but long term environmental treatment is unnecessary as the parasites die if they are off their host for long. These parasites are species specific but highly contagious between hamsters; use caution when introducing new hamsters to an existing group.

Respiratory infection: Signs include sneezing, wheezing, lethargy, nasal or eye discharge, or difficulty breathing. Various bacteria may cause this. Treatment involves using antibiotics with caution, as hamsters may develop severe bowel upsets during treatment. Minimize respiratory disease with a warm, clean cage; avoid use of wood chip beddings, and feed a balanced diet.

Head tilt (wry neck, torticollis): This is usually due to internal ear infection, sometimes secondary to a respiratory infection. The hamster usually tilts the head to one side and has a loss of balance, often falling or circling when trying to walk. Bacteria are the usual cause. Treatment is with antibiotics.

Hypothermia: Golden hamsters are very cold sensitive and may become unconscious at temperatures below 65 F. Their breathing is very shallow and they often appear dead, but may slowly revive when warmed in one’s hand. Avoid air temperatures below 70°F in the room where your hamster lives, and keep the cage away from cool areas such as windows and floors. Provide warm bedding such as recycled paper or tissue paper for your pet to nest in; a small nest box also helps conserve body heat when sleeping.

Fight wounds: Hamsters can be aggressive and antisocial and often fight if housed together. This may result in bite wounds; their eyes are also easily popped out of the socket during fighting. Female hamsters may kill their young if disturbed by humans or other hamsters. Any visible wounds on a hamster require immediate medical treatment; the risk of infection is great, and treatment of abscesses in hamsters is difficult. Early antibiotic therapy to prevent infection is the safer option.