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Is a Hamster the Right Pet for You?

The Humane Society of the United States

It can be tempting to acquire a hamster on impulse. After all, these little guys are the picture of cuteness: small, round, furry, and inquisitive. A great starter pet, right? Not at all! Here are some important questions to consider before you dive headlong into a relationship.

What type of schedule do you keep?

Hamsters are nocturnal, which means they will be most active at night. If you're a light sleeper who is disturbed by the smallest of sounds, a squeaky wheel at 2 a.m. might drive you to distraction. If you work a graveyard shift and are looking for furry companionship during the day, hamsters are bound to frustrate your expectations. But if you're a night owl, a hamster could be the perfect companion when you're burning the midnight oil!

Do you have children?

Because of their small size, hamsters are often purchased as pets for children who want to play with them during the day. However, just when it's time for your child to go to sleep, it's time for a hamster to wake up. A hamster awakened suddenly from a nap during the day may bite. Therefore, hamsters need to be handled only with adult supervision by children under 8 years old.

Hamsters require a gentle touch and may be easily startled by sudden movement and loud noises. The motor skills of children under 8 are usually not refined enough to make a hamster feel comfortable being handled. Young children who lack fine motor control and self-restraint may inadvertently drop a hamster, squeeze him, or scare him into biting.

Young children are also at greater risk for zoonotic diseases (diseases that can be passed from animals to humans) because of their undeveloped immune systems and because of their tendency for close contact with pets without proper hand-washing. Children under 5 are particularly vulnerable to the effects of salmonella, a type of intestinal bacteria that hamsters can carry. Although rare, hamsters have been known to carry Lymphocytic choriomeningitis, a virus that can seriously sicken young children.

Are you pregnant? Do you have a weakened immune system?

Hamsters can carry salmonella, an intestinal bacteria that causes short but intense bouts of sickness in healthy adults. However, it can produce more severe problems if a pregnant woman passes it to her unborn child. Salmonella can also seriously sicken a person who's already in a weakened state from other health conditions.

Hamsters have been known to carry a virus called Lymphocytic choriomeningitis. In healthy adults, this virus causes flu-like symptoms or no symptoms at all. However, it can be transmitted from a pregnant mother to her unborn child and can produce severe illness in people with compromised immune systems.

How much space to you have?

Syrian hamsters are solitary, territorial animals who must have their own space in which to live. Hamsters will fight and inflict serious injuries to each other if housed in the same quarters, so each must have his or her own separate space. A female who gives birth may kill and eat her babies if disturbed, and allowing hamsters to breed is not recommended. Dwarf hamsters, on the other hand, may be able to live together if introduced properly.

What's your budget?

The adoption fee or purchase price for a hamster is typically small, but there are startup costs and ongoing needs to anticipate. The initial purchase of equipment and supplies is likely to include:

Wire cage, aquarium, or modular habitat"

Bedding and nesting materials

Nesting box

Exercise wheel

Food dish

Water bottle

Hamster chow

Treats

Toys

Are you prepared to spend several hundred dollars a year on your new friend, not including veterinary costs, if your hamster develops a chronic condition like diabetes or requires emergency treatment?

Do you have time for a hamster?

Hamsters are fairly independent and can entertain themselves for extended periods of time, provided their housing is properly enriched with toys, bedding, and opportunities for burrowing and climbing. Still, to be happy and well-adjusted, your hamster should receive daily handling and interaction. Keep in mind that you'll need to thoroughly clean your hamster's cage every week.

Are you ready for the commitment?

The average lifespan for a hamster is 2.5 to 3 years, with slight variations among species. If you can't make a long commitment to a pet, this characteristic may be appealing. But if you have young children and aren't prepared for them to experience the death of a pet, you may prefer a longer-lived animal.

Do you live in Hawaii?

It's illegal to own pet hamsters in Hawaii. The climate is similar to hamsters' natural desert habitat, and agricultural and environmental officials have expressed concern that released or escaped hamsters could establish wild colonies and damage crops and native plants and animals.