

Youth and 4-H

# Hamsters as a Pet Project

The hamster pet project will help you learn how to care for your pet. You will explore your pet's need for good nutrition, proper exercise, and the right environment for a healthy life. In doing so, you will be able to solve problems and make the right decisions about your pet.

## You Can Learn About:

1. making decisions and solving problems
2. creating the right environment for your pet
3. feeding your hamster
4. developing the life skills of communication, decision-making, leadership, citizenship, coping with change, and learning how to learn.

## Getting Started

- Read this project guide.
- Plan your project goals. Think about what you want to do or learn. Talk about your ideas with your leader, parent, or friend. Write your goals on the *4-H Project Record (4H-94)*.
- Carry out what you have decided to do. Find other people and resources

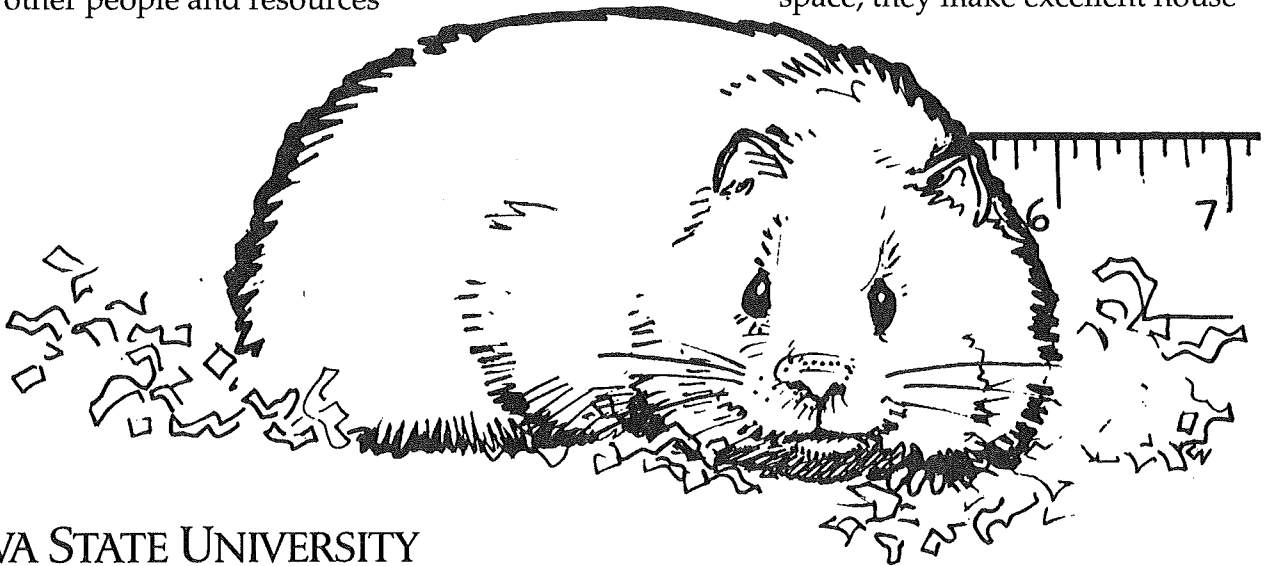
that can help you. Your leader, Extension staff, teachers, librarian, veterinarian, and family also may help you meet your goals. Check your progress with your leader. As you complete your project activities, write what you learned in your *4-H Project Record (4H-94)*.

- Share what you learned with others. Options could include: exhibiting your pet at the county fair; giving an educational presentation for your club or school, or at the county level; helping younger members with their hamster projects; writing an article for your school or community about the importance of providing proper care for pets; or other ideas you might have for sharing.

## Background

Hamsters are related to mice, rats, squirrels, and beavers; all are rodents. Hamsters look like tiny bears. Most pet hamsters are Golden, or Syrian, hamsters. These hamsters are related to a litter of one male and two female hamsters found near Aleppo, Syria, about 60 years ago.

Because hamsters are small and take up little space, they make excellent house



IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY  
University Extension

Ames, Iowa

4H-560G | Revised | June 1993

pets. When fully grown, a hamster may weigh 120 to 160 grams (4.2 to 5.6 ounces, which is less than a box of juice) or more, and be 16 to 18 centimeters (6.4 to 7.2 inches) long from the tip of its nose to the end of its stubby tail. A hamster keeps itself very, very clean and has no noticeable body odor. A hamster will seldom be ill if it is fed nutritious food, given a chance to exercise, and kept comfortable in a clean cage. Hamsters usually live 3 to 4 years.

## How to Care for Your Hamster

### Providing a Cage for Shelter

Unless they are raised with their birth litter, hamsters prefer to live alone as they grow and mature. In nature, hamsters leave the litter and live alone. They act aggressively toward unfamiliar hamsters but not to litter mates if they are raised together in captivity. Because hamsters that live together may quarrel, you probably will want to keep only one in a cage, unless you want to breed them.

You can buy special hamster cages and runways that mimic hamsters' natural dens. Hamster cages come with metal bottoms that you can remove easily for cleaning. Some cages have an upstairs platform for climbing. The cage needs to have enough room for an exercise wheel and an area for the hamster to stockpile food.

An exercise wheel is not necessary but, because exercise is so important for hamster health, include something in the hamster cage for climbing and running. Hamsters have been measured to run 8 kilometers (5 miles) a day.

You can make a satisfactory hamster cage from a bird cage or an aquarium. You need to clean and disinfect any previously used cage to prevent your hamster from getting a contagious disease. Wooden and plastic cages are not suitable because hamsters will use their sharp teeth to gnaw through the cage and escape. Hamsters that get loose can crawl into the heating ducts and walls of your house, where they are likely to die. Do not use cages with wire mesh bottoms. Hamsters are natural hoarders, and the wire mesh does not allow them to stockpile food. The wire mesh also may cause foot injuries.



Hamsters need bedding material for their cages. Shredded newspaper makes good bedding, or you can use wood shavings, sawdust, or other similar materials that you can buy. You can also use cat litter. The purpose of the bedding is to absorb the moisture from urination and spilled water, and to make the hamsters comfortable.

A hamster will select one corner of its cage as a permanent bathroom. If the bedding in the bathroom corner gets very wet, your hamster will get dirty. Also, the urine in the bedding produces ammonia, a gas that increases the risk of pneumonia. To keep your hamster dry and healthy, clean the bathroom corner every day. Also, once a week, scrub the entire cage with warm, soapy water and a disinfectant, such as chlorine bleach diluted about 1:10 in the wash water (1 tablespoon bleach to 10 tablespoons water, which is 5/8 cup of water). Put fresh bedding into the newly cleaned cage.

Besides bedding, hamsters also need nest-building material. Both male and female hamsters build nests, but pregnant females build more elaborate nests for their pups. Absorbent cotton or shredded toilet tissue may be ideal for nest building. It is important not to give shredded newspaper to pregnant hamsters. The pregnant female will chew the newspaper for nesting, and it will get stuck in her cheek pouches. In cold weather, hamsters will weave their nesting material into a tiny igloo. In the summer, however, the little hamster home will look like a bird nest.

It is important to keep the environment in the cage the same from day to day. Provide light at the same time each day for a minimum of 14 hours. Keep the temperature at 21 to 22 degrees Celsius (69.8 to 71.6 degrees Fahrenheit). Cooler temperatures may cause your hamster to hibernate.

## Feeding

Feeding hamsters is never a problem. By nature, they are omnivorous, meaning they eat both meat and plants. Avoid giving meat to your hamster. It is best to feed it commercial hamster food that provides balanced nutrition. Otherwise, feed dry dog food and green vegetables, such as lettuce, cabbage, or other green-leafed vegetables. Feed your hamster once a day, preferably at the same time daily. Like many other animals, hamsters seem to possess a built-in clock. Your hamster will soon learn to come to its cage door at mealtime.

Place food on a dish or on the floor. Avoid using a feeder with grill bars that hold the food. This kind of feeder requires the hamster to break the food into small bits, and the food cannot be stockpiled. When eating from a dish, your hamster will probably load up its cheek pouches and then store everything neatly away in a cage corner. Let your hamster hoard a small amount of food, since hoarding is one of its instincts. However, remove any uneaten greens because they spoil quickly.

Provide water in a gravity flow bottle. This type of bottle has a rubber stopper with a short piece of glass or metal tubing through it.

When the bottle is attached to the cage upside down, it allows water to flow slowly into the tube as your hamster drinks from it. The water needs to be fresh and clean, so change it every day. Check the bottle often to make sure it contains plenty of water. Sometimes gravity flow bottles leak. When they do, the cage floor and bedding get wet and the hamsters have nothing to drink. If this happens, dry the cage, replace the bedding, and discard wet, stockpiled food so it does not spoil.

## Handling

Daily handling, or gentling, will ensure that your hamster remains tame and friendly. When handling your hamster, scoop it up gently in the palm of your hand. Next, have it walk from hand to hand, and at the same time, stroke it gently, and talk to it.

Hamsters are playful creatures. After they learn to trust you, they will hang by one foot from your finger, climb a toy ladder as you hold it, and provide endless amusement.

House-adapted hamsters may be allowed to move freely, but attended, outside the cage, but they must never be left alone on a table or other high place, since hamsters cannot judge heights and may try to walk on air—with disastrous results.



Never pick up your hamster until it is fully awake. Hamsters are deep sleepers; they also are nearsighted. If you surprise one, your finger might get nipped.

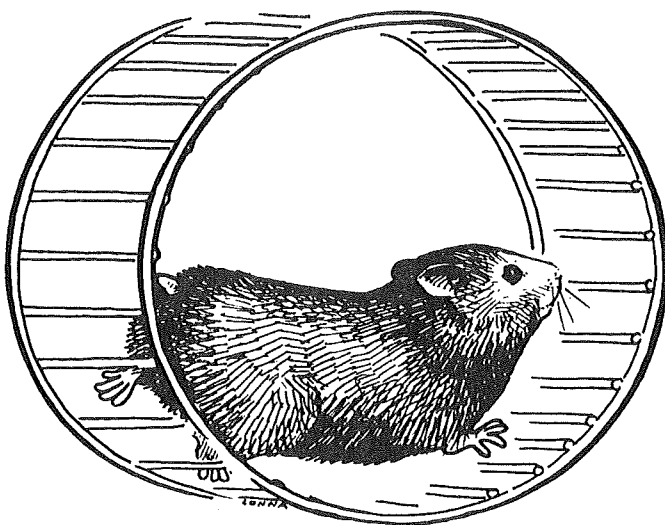
## Breeding

The rule is **DO NOT BREED**. It is best not to let your hamsters breed. Buy new hamsters from commercial sources instead.

Keeping pet hamsters requires responsible ownership and population control. Consider these facts about the hamster's breeding ability. The female bears an average of six to seven pups but can bear as many as 12 pups. Within a week after giving birth, the mother can breed again. So, a single pair of hamsters could produce 36 to 144 new hamsters in a year!

If you want your hamsters to have a litter, find a home for the pups before you breed the parents. Many of your friends may be interested. For young people, a hamster breeding project may be a fascinating and valuable firsthand experience. Within a single month, the entire process of pregnancy through birth can be observed and recorded.

Information on breeding hamsters is available at your local library.



### ... and justice for all

Iowa State University Extension programs and policies are consistent with pertinent federal and state laws and regulations on nondiscrimination regarding race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, and handicap.

## Keeping Your Hamster Healthy

If you feed and take care of your hamster properly, it will be healthy and will not get sick often. A healthy hamster is alert and active, with bright eyes, a smooth coat of hair, and pricked-up ears. A sick hamster will be listless and lethargic, its ears will lie flat, and its coat will be messy.

Hamsters can get "wet-tail" diarrhea, which is contagious, but you can prevent "wet-tail" diarrhea by keeping your hamster's cage clean.

As hamsters get older, it is common for them to develop tumors.

Vaccinations are not required for hamsters.

## Think About

### What You Have Learned

As a result of your hamster project, you have learned about caring for your pet and creating the right environment for it. You have learned how to be responsible for your hamster and how to make the right decisions to give it a healthy place to live. We hope you have had fun with your pet project and will continue to explore additional 4-H projects and opportunities.

Prepared by Chuck Morris, associate director, Youth and 4-H; Loren Will, Extension veterinarian; and Melva L. Berkland, Extension communication specialist

Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperating. Robert M. Anderson, Jr., director, Ames, Iowa. Distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914.