

What Every Hamster Owner Should Know Before It's Too Late

Torpor is a state hamsters can enter when the temperature becomes too cool. It's an unnerving experience for new owners, as their pet may appear lifeless. Here's what you need to know about this normal response to certain environmental conditions, and what to avoid doing if it happens.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- More than a few unsuspecting hamster owners have had the unnerving experience of finding their tiny pet in a state of torpor — barely moving and unresponsive; many have panicked, assuming their little one has died or is dying
- Species of hamsters that don't normally hibernate can go into torpor (i.e., permissive, or facultative hibernation) under certain environmental conditions, especially when the temperature is too cool for too long
- If you have a hamster, it's important to know how to recognize torpor, how to reverse it, and most importantly of all, how to prevent it
- To safely revive a hamster from torpor, owners should gradually increase temperature and light, using body heat or warmed towels rather than direct heat sources, which can be dangerous
- Prevention involves maintaining proper temperature (65° to 75°F), providing at least 12 hours of daily light, ensuring adequate food and water, and regularly monitoring the hamster's condition

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Many new owners of hamsters aren't aware that one of the more interesting, if unsettling behaviors these little creatures can display is a state of torpor or even true hibernation. In this condition, they barely move (even to the point of appearing dead), are cool to the touch and limp, and don't eat, drink, or eliminate. They may have no visible heartbeat, but upon closer inspection, you should notice non-rhythmic, shallow breathing.

Torpor (aka permissive or facultative hibernation) differs from true (obligatory) hibernation, but the terms are often used interchangeably, because both describe a state of slow heart and respiration rates, and a decrease in activity and body temperature.

Torpor can occur at any time of year and helps hamsters conserve energy in unfavorable conditions such as when food is scarce, or temperatures are too low. A state of torpor can last hours to days, ending when conditions improve. However, if it goes on too long, it can result in death from dehydration or hypothermia.

When and Why Hamsters Hibernate

Torpor and true hibernation are thought to be adaptations to the desert environment from which most hamsters evolved. Whether or not your own hammy ever appears to be "playing dead" will in part depend on the species (there are 18 or 19 types of hamsters, depending on your source).

For example, European hamsters are known to sleep for significant periods of time during the winter months in a state of true hibernation. They're among the species of hamsters who accumulate body fat during the warm months of the year and hibernate during the winter.

Dwarf hamsters, on the other hand, don't hibernate under normal conditions, but only when their environmental situation requires it. Female hamsters hibernate for shorter lengths of time than males.

Hamsters are most comfortable when the temperature in their environment is 65° to 75°F. If the temperature falls below this range for several days it can trigger torpor in many species, while others require one to two months of continuous low temps to go into hibernation.

Other conditions that can trigger torpor in hamsters include keeping them in the dark for more than 12 hours a day, reduced access to food and water, and lack of safe housing or bedding material for burrowing.

What to Do if Your Hamster Is in Torpor

If you find your hamster in a state of torpor and fear she's no longer alive, take one or more of the following steps:

- Hold a mirror or spoon directly in front of her nose — a slight fog means she's still breathing
- Stroke her fur and watch to see if her whiskers twitch
- Check to see if her cheek pouch temperature is slightly warmer than her body temperature

If you see none of these signs of life, and your hamster's been subjected to a 66°F or lower temperature for more than 24 hours, sadly, it's very likely she's gone.

If, thankfully, you've confirmed she's still alive and has been in torpor for less than a day, gradually increase both the temperature and light in her environment to safely bring her around. If she's been in torpor for longer than a day or doesn't recover relatively quickly, provide 12 hours of bright light, adequate food and water, and gentle massages to increase her circulation.

An effective way to gradually warm your hamster is to gently cradle her in the palm of your hand and let your body temperature elevate hers. Another technique is to wrap her in a slightly warm cloth (e.g., a hand towel that's been warmed by putting it in the dryer). What you should NOT do is use an external heating element (such as a space heater or blow dryer), nor a heating pad, as they will raise her temp too rapidly to be safe.

If your hamster's state of torpor lasts more than a day, you need to be concerned about dehydration and malnutrition. A gradual reintroduction of fresh water and food will be necessary, along with a veterinary exam to determine if there are any health concerns, along with appropriate treatment recommendations.

Prevention Tips

To prevent torpor or hibernation in your hamster:

1. Ensure his environment remains between 65° to 75°F and prevent temperature variations by eliminating drafts and exposure to direct sunlight
2. Ensure he's exposed to at least 12 hours of bright light daily
3. Provide sufficient food, water, and accessible bedding
4. Handle and observe your hamster often and take corrective measures as necessary to prevent torpor/hibernation

Sources and References

[PetMD, April 4, 2024.](#)
