

How to Make Your Hamster Happier

Hamsters raised in one type of environment were happier and more optimistic than their hamster peers. If you have a hamster as a pet, here's what to do to make your hamster happy.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Hamsters experience emotions like happiness, sadness, optimism, and depression
- It's possible to support your hamster's well-being by making changes to his living environment
- Hamsters raised in an enriched environment (with extra bedding and toys, etc.) displayed more optimism
- The addition of extra cage-enrichment items, such as hammocks, ledges, and chew toys, resulted in increased optimism in the hamsters
- When enrichment items were removed (reverting cages back to basic care), there was a negative shift in emotional state similar to depression

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If your dog wags his tail or your cat purrs contentedly in your lap, you assume he's happy and healthy. But what about your hamster? With no demonstrative tails or overtly obvious vocal noises or facial expressions, you could watch your hamster closely all day and still be oblivious as to his emotional state.

Figuring out how to accurately assess animal emotions has become an important part of welfare science, especially as it pertains to the use of animals in scientific research. But, of course, it's also important in the care of animals we keep as pets.

Research published in the journal Royal Society Open Science revealed that not only do hamsters experience emotions like happiness, sadness, optimism, and depression, but it's possible to support your hamster's well-being by making changes to his living environment.¹

Hamsters Given Extra Enrichment Are More Optimistic

The study involved 30 Syrian hamsters (the most common type of pet hamster), which were trained to approach drink stations that contained either a "reward" (sugar water) drink or an aversive drink. The researchers then created ambiguous situations in which the hamsters did not know whether the drink was tasty or offensive.

The hamsters were the same except for one key difference. Some had been raised in a more comfortable environment, with extra soft bedding, for instance, while others were raised in just a basic care environment.

It turned out the hamsters raised in the cozier environment displayed more optimism in their decision-making

throughout the study. Meanwhile, the addition of extra-cage enrichment items, such as hammocks, ledges, and chew toys, resulted in increased optimism in the hamsters.

When enrichment items were removed (reverting cages back to basic care), there was a negative shift in emotional state similar to depression. Other animals aside from hamsters, including rats, mice, dairy calves, sheep, chickens, starlings, and goats, have also displayed such emotional shifts. The researchers noted:²

"So far, studies have revealed that manipulations presumed to create a negative state (such as disrupted housing conditions or dehorning in calves) lead to reduced responses (more 'no-go's) to the ambiguous probes. This negative shift in judgment bias is presumed to arise from a negative shift in underlying emotion state."

They continued, "Positive manipulations (e.g. addition of environmental enrichment) generally lead to increased responses (more 'go's) at one or more of the ambiguous probes. This is presumed to arise from positive shifts in judgment bias and underlying emotion state."

What to Know If You're Considering a Hamster As a Pet

Hamsters make popular pets because they're cute and cuddly, but they have big personalities and demand regular care and attention. The most common pet hamster, the Syrian hamster (also known as the golden hamster or teddy bear hamster), lives an average of one to two years and grows to about six inches in length.

Though they're often viewed as pets for children, keep in mind that hamsters are nocturnal, which means they'll be up playing, exercising, and digging while your child is trying to sleep. They may also become irritated and nip at anyone who tries to waken them during the day, a time they'd rather be sleeping.³

If you choose a Syrian hamster as a pet, it's important to understand they are solitary animals and must be kept alone. Dwarf hamsters, on the other hand, like company and can live in pairs.

How to Make Your Hamster a Cozy, Stimulating Home

Syrian hamsters can be kept in a wire cage or 20-gallon aquarium, although if you have space for a bigger cage, your hamster will enjoy it. Cages with plastic crawling tubes will also be enjoyed, although they are admittedly harder to keep clean.

The cage should be lined with absorbent bedding, such as aspen shavings or shredded paper, and be sure to include a running wheel, an enclosed spot for your hamster to hide and sleep (such as a small box with an entrance hole), and crawling tubes (empty cardboard paper towel and toilet paper rolls work well for this).

Your hamster will also enjoy pieces of a napkin or paper towel to shred and build a nest and wood chew toys. Fresh water should be available at all times in an inverted drinking bottle.

As for feeding, you can use a commercially available hamster mix (which typically contains seeds, grains, cracked corn, and pellets), but you should also supplement with fresh foods every couple of days. If you feed a commercial mix, look for a blend that is preservative (BHA) free. Buy small bags of food that can be used up in 3 months or less, and store the food in your refrigerator or freezer to maximize freshness.

Examples of foods your hamster will enjoy include the following. Keep in mind that hamsters love to stuff their pouches and hard food in their cage to eat later. Be sure to clean out their "stash" regularly so fresh foods don't sit and spoil in the cage.

Safe fruits and veggies:

- Apples without seeds
- Bananas
- Blueberries
- Grapes (no seeds)
- Strawberries
- Broccoli
- Zucchini
- Carrots
- Dark leafy greens
- Cauliflower
- Cucumber
- Peas
- Spinach
- Sweet potato

Other safe foods for treats:

- Unsalted nuts
- Lentils
- Pumpkin seeds
- Bits of hard-boiled eggs
- Brown rice, cooked
- Whole grain bread, fresh or toasted
- Whole wheat pasta, cooked
- Whole grain cereal without added sugar
- Air popped popcorn (plain, no butter, or salt)

Should You Let Your Hamster Out of Her Cage?

Yes, hamsters will enjoy time outside of their cage daily, but you'll need to be sure it's only in an enclosed, hamster-safe area and you're supervising her closely. Some people use a bathtub (close the drain first) for this purpose, but others let their hamster roam a hamster-proofed room.

Keep an eye out for electrical wires, which hamsters may chew on, or areas where your hamster could become trapped

(like a heating vent). Finally, if your hamster appears sick, seek medical care from a veterinarian who works with small pets.

Matted fur, weight loss, shaking, runny nose, diarrhea, or dull-looking eyes may be signals your pet is sick. Hamsters are particularly susceptible to respiratory problems and can even catch a cold from you.⁴

Sources and References

¹ [Royal Society Open Science July 1, 2015](#)

² [Discovery News July 28, 2015 \(Archived\)](#)

^{3, 4} [American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Hamster Care \(Archived\)](#)
