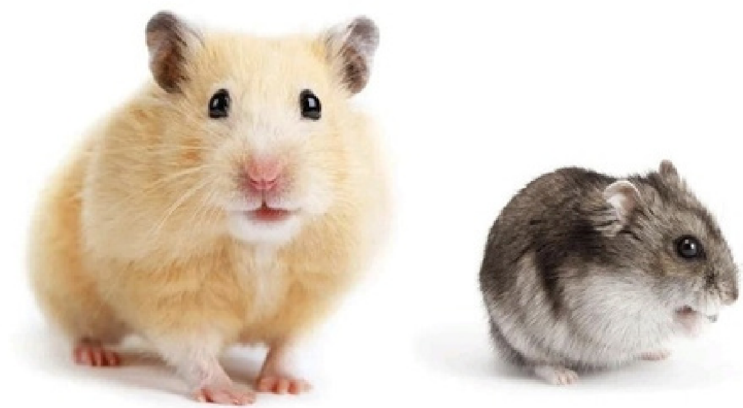


# BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO HAMSTER CARE



by

**HAMSTERS SOUTH AFRICA**

&



**HYGGELIG**  
PET PRODUCTS

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# THINKING ABOUT GETTING A HAMSTER?



This care guide, written by Hamsters South Africa and Hyggelig Pet Products will help guide you to getting set up correctly, understanding your hamster and keeping your hamster healthy and happy.

Please visit the Hamsters South Africa Website for more in depth information on Hamster Care - [www.hamsterssouthafrica.com](http://www.hamsterssouthafrica.com)

## HOW MANY HAMSTERS?

All species of hamsters available in South Africa are **STRICTLY SOLITARY**. Hamsters, by nature and instinct, are territorial animals and **NEED** to live **ALONE**.

No pairs. No groups. They do not need or want "friends" or "companions" other than their human/s. Each hamster will require their own habitat.

Hamsters cannot be introduced to each other or have any form of interaction, even during playtimes.



## WHICH TYPE OF HAMSTER?

### HYBRID DWARF HAMSTER

The smallest of the hamster species available in SA.  
Lifespan: 18-24months average

Usually very sociable, curious little hamsters and, while they are predominantly nocturnal, will readily appear during daytime when hearing their human nearby, and will be accepting of some playtime once fully awake.

Tend to be more nippy and can bite quite sore in moments of nervousness, particularly while being tamed, or startled while sleeping. Once they know their human, the nips get more gentle and are usually a way of sending a message that "I want to go back to my habitat" or "I've had enough of being handled, let me run free for a bit", etc. These little nips can sometimes put children off, and it needs to be explained to them.

### SYRIAN HAMSTER

The largest of the hamster species available in SA.  
Lifespan: 18-24months average

These are extremely solitary and territorial hamsters and must never, under ANY circumstances be housed together (nor any other species of hamster).

They make wonderful pets and are slower & more chilled compared to dwarfs, and rarely nip/bite once tamed.

Most do not like to be woken up during the day so may not be ideal for young children who go to bed early, since they only emerge after around 8pm. The bite is very sore but, once tamed, generally only happens if they are extremely frightened or in pain, or if you wake them up without warning.

You will need much larger equipment and accessories for a Syrian.



# ENCLOSURES/HABITATS

It is very important to provide your hamster with the largest safest space you can afford. Plastic and wire cages sold in pet shops are in no way suitable for a hamster to live in permanently!

## MINIMUM CAGE SIZE

Minimum habitat size for Dwarf Hamsters:  
5000cm<sup>2</sup> (100cm x 50cm)

Minimum habitat size for Syrians Hamsters:  
6000cm<sup>2</sup> (120cm x 50cm)

Longer housing with UNBROKEN GROUND FLOOR SPACE and a low shelf is the best & safest.

Hamsters are ground dwelling animals with poor eyesight, therefore tall cages with multiple levels are not recommended and are not appropriate for meeting their needs.



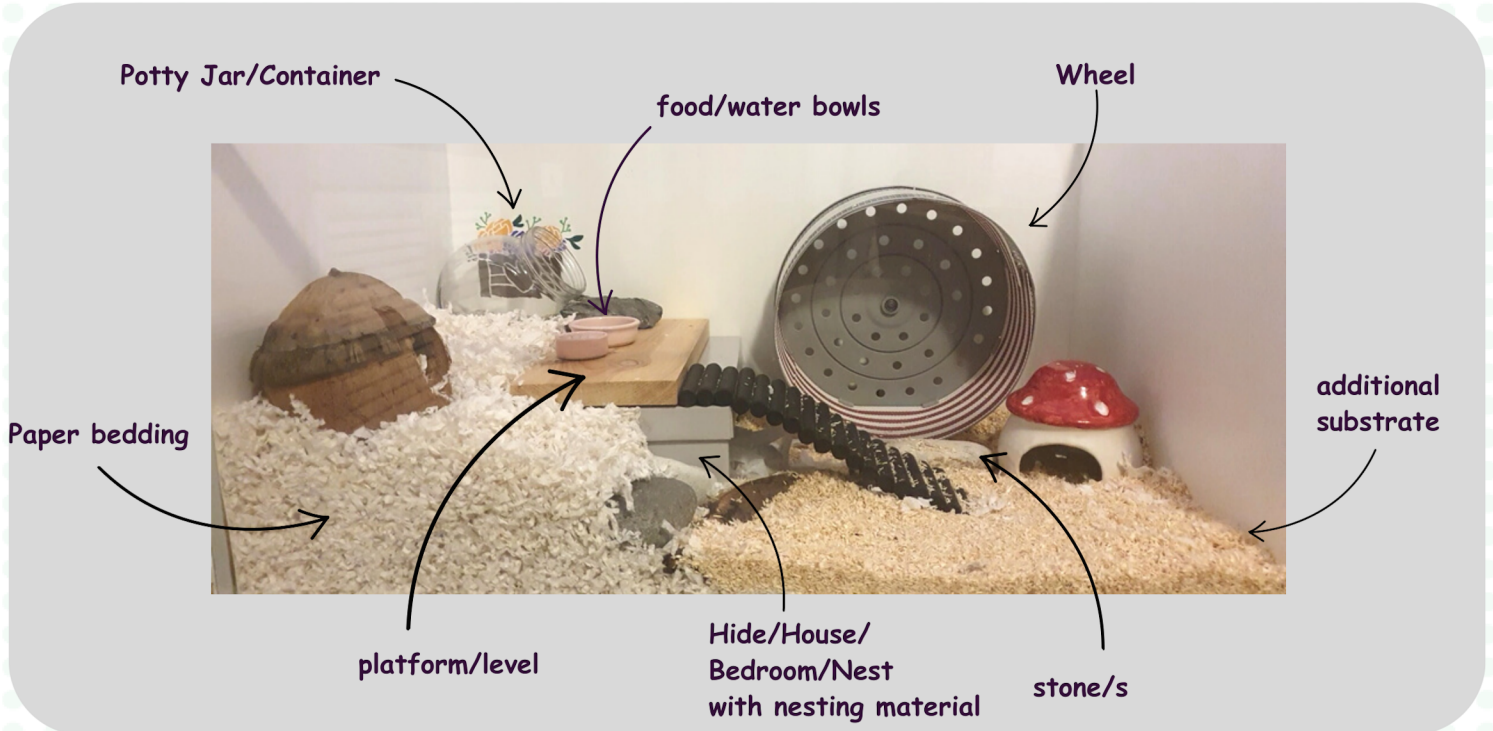
## HABITAT SAFETY

- Place it in a relatively peaceful spot in the home, but not in a room where people may smoke cigarettes or have loud parties, and preferably not too near electronic equipment.
- Never place the hamster or habitat in direct sunlight or draughts, or below open windows.
- Make sure that the habitat is safe from being knocked or pulled down by children and other pets.
- Ensure that the habitat has a heavy, secure lid that cannot be easily knocked open (by other pets or people).
- VENTILATION is extremely important. The lid should be at least 80% meshed (drilled holes, even 100, are not adequate for ventilation and airflow)



# HABITAT ESSENTIALS

These are the **MUST-HAVE** items and are **NOT OPTIONAL**



## FOOD/WATER BOWLS

Food and water bowls should be placed on a sturdy platform for easy access.

Access to water should be available at all times.

Both bowls and bottles are suitable for water but bowls are a much more natural way for hamsters to drink and put less strain on the neck, better for teeth and tongue and are much easier to clean.

Bowls should be sturdy enough with a flat bottom to prevent being tipped over.

Do not use water bottles with glass spouts as they can be broken and injure your hamster.

<https://www.hamsterssouthafrica.com/nutrition-supplements-water>

## HIDE/HOUSE/BEDROOM/NEST

Do provide a little room/house for your hamster to make a cozy nest to sleep in.

A little cardboard box with a doorway cut out is perfectly suitable (think small packaging boxes, shoe boxes etc) and are the most affordable and practical option.

Wooden boxes are also safe but can get mouldy from humidity/body heat. They must be sealed thoroughly, have ventilation and we do recommend lining them with cardboard to protect against chewing, urine and to provide insulation.

The plastic houses and domes available in pet shops are not very healthy and get too hot in summer and are too cold in winter.

## POTTY JAR/CONTAINER

A little potty jar or container filled with potty litter will provide a dedicated area for your hamster to urinate in. This helps with keeping the habitat clean and encouraging good potty manners.

### SUITABLE POTTY LITTERS ARE:

PLAIN Bentonite gravel (fine clumping cat litter),

Kid's Play Sands (sterilised),

Reptile Sand (plain only),

Reptile Resort Chinchilla Bath Sand (import grade only).

\*Please note that many kids play sand brands are now adding extra silica and this is not safe for hamsters - we recommend Bentonite gravel as the safest option\*

<https://www.hamsterssouthafrica.com/sand-and-toilets>

## NESTING MATERIAL

Hamsters like a soft warm bed. Strip up a lot of cheap 1-ply toilet paper for your hamster to drag to his chosen sleeping place (not 2-ply or facial tissues, as these can make too much dust when torn up).

**AVOID FLUFFY NESTING**, wool & fabric as this is incredibly dangerous - gets stuck in pouches, tangled around teeth, nails and limbs and doesn't disintegrate, which will cause intestinal blockages if ingested, resulting in illness, and even death due to infection & internal complications, and a hamster will even chew off a limb to free itself from entanglement.

<https://www.hamsterssouthafrica.com/nesting-substrates>





# HABITAT ESSENTIALS

These are the **MUST-HAVE** items and are **NOT OPTIONAL**

## RUNNING WHEELS

Wheels are an important necessity as they provide exercise and enrichment.

Wheels that are too small are uncomfortable and cause pain and damage to the spine!

### ABSOLUTE MINIMUM SIZE

The larger the better for either species!

**DWARF:** 21cm - 30cm (8.3 - 11.8")

**SYRIAN/TEDDY BEAR:** 27cm - 35cm (11 - 14")

Wheels must be **SOLID**.

Wheels with with open rungs, mesh, framework and cross-bars are dangerous; causing painful bumblefoot, broken limbs and other injuries (even death).



<https://www.hamsterssouthafrica.com/wheels-balls>



## PAPER BEDDING

The only safe bedding substrate is clean **PAPER-BASED** bedding.

Safe brands available in SA are from:

Hyggelig Pet Products SA, Robyn's Hamster Supplies,

Keri's Custom Cabins, Holistic Hamster,

Kaytee Clean & Cozy Natural, Carefresh, Oxbow Pure Comfort.

The bedding section should be atleast 1/3rd of the habitat and atleast 25cm deep to encourage burrowing and tunneling (which is healthy natural behaviour).

Scented bedding and printed paper is to be avoided at all costs!!!

**AVOID PINE & WOOD SHAVINGS.** These are unfortunately still pushed by most pet shops, but are highly toxic to hamsters. These will cause allergic reactions and respiratory infections due to certain oils, phenols & dust that cause eye, skin, & lung infections (kiln drying does not remove all).

Straw, hay, pellet bedding, fabric, etc. should also be avoided due to various risks.

<https://www.hamsterssouthafrica.com/bedding-nesting-substrates>



## ADDITIONAL SUBSTRATES

There are number of safe additional substrates that can be used to create sections throughout the habitat and provide your hamster with a variety of textures and enrichment.

Chipsi Digging Substrate, Cocopeat, Chipsi Super, Chipsi XXL are all good options that hamsters thoroughly enjoy.

<https://www.hamsterssouthafrica.com/enrichment>

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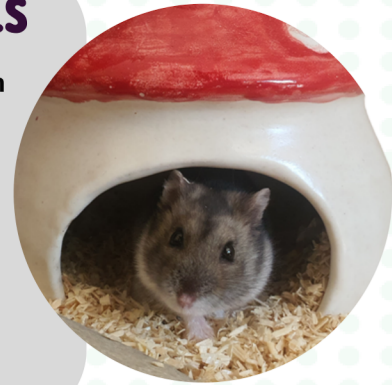
## ACCESSORIES, ENRICHMENT, TUBES AND TUNNELS

Hamsters prefer habitats that are filled with “clutter” - additional accessories such as grapevines, wood tunnels, bendy bridges, burrow boxes, chamber boxes, multiple hides, tubes and tunnels, stones and more offer a variety of natural textures, hiding spots and stimulation.

Chews/Gnaws such as whimzees, sekelbos sticks, apple sticks, willow sticks, nibble rolls etc. all offer great stimulation and enrichment, as well as aid in dental care.

These all aid in ensuring your hamster is healthy and stress-free.

<https://www.hamsterssouthafrica.com/enrichment>



## FOOD & NUTRITION

Diet and nutrition is one of the most important aspects of hamster care.

Correct nutrition, from as young as possible, even during gestation, will make a big difference in your hamster's well-being and longevity.

The diet needs to consist of (1) **GOOD QUALITY DRY FOOD MIX**, (2) **FRESH FOOD** (fruit, veggies & protein), and (3) **FRESH WATER**. Hamsters with poor nutrition usually suffer from various ailments as a result, especially as they age.



Species-Appropriate nutrition is the best way to provide the balanced and correct diet for your hamster. There are two highly recommend food mixes available on the South African market that are produced locally - Hyggelig Syrian/Dwarf Hamster Mixes and Oliver's Burrow Hamster Mix.

The best available commercial brand is Bunny Nature Hamster Dream Expert & Dwarf Hamster Dream Expert. Please avoid food mixes that consist mainly of sunflower seeds, mealies and pellets. A lot of detail is provided on the HSA website about the good and bad mixes.

<https://www.hamsterssouthafrica.com/nutrition-food>



Please note that commercial mixes and brands with pellets are not balanced and not hugely favoured by hamsters and require additional nutrition to meet the dietary needs of both species of hamster.

Puur Hamster/ Puur Hamster Dwarf, Harry Hamster, Versele-Laga Nature Hamster / Mini Hamster, Burgess Hamster, Mice & Gerbil (pellets only) will need to mix together in specific ratios but will still require additional nutrition.



# SAFE FRUIT & VEG

OFFER A VARIETY EVERY 1 TO 3 DAYS

Alfalfa (small quantities for young & pregnant hamsters only)

Apricot\*  
Apple\* (not the seeds)  
Asparagus  
Baby Marrow/Courgette/Zucchini  
Baby Spinach  
Baby Corn\*  
Banana\*  
Barley Grass  
Bean (Mung) Sprouts – shoots only  
Blackberry leaves & fruit\*  
Blueberry  
Broad beans\*  
Broccoli (florets & leaves – no thick stems)  
Butternut (pips also make great treats)  
Carrot\*  
Cauliflower (florets & leaves – no thick stems)  
Chard/Spinach (small amount only)  
Cherries (not the pips)\*  
Chickweed  
Cornflowers (blue or pink)  
Corn (baby corn, mealies)\*  
Cos Lettuce (dark tips only)  
Courgette/Zucchini/Baby Marrow  
Cranberry (not dried/crasins)\*  
Dates\*  
Dandelion flower/leaf/roots (not the milky veins)  
Dill 'leaves' (not bulb)  
Endive (leafy parts only)  
Fennel 'leaves' (not bulb)  
Fig\*  
Flowers (see topic on [Accessories page](#))  
Green Beans  
Gem Squash (pips also make great treats)  
Hemp (seeds & leaves)  
Kale  
Kiwi (without seeds)\*  
Lentils (cooked or sprouted only)

Loganberry\*  
Lychee\*  
Mange Tout (snap peas/snow peas)  
Mango\*  
Marigold petals  
Melon\*  
Mealie kernels (corn)\* – avoid for pregnant/nursing mums & baby hamsters.  
Millet (sprays can be left in the habitat)  
Mung Beans (sprouted or cooked only)  
NUTS – shelled, plain (Sweet Almond, Brazil, Cashew, Hazel, Pecan, Pistachio). Walnut can be in the shell.  
Pansy/Viola flowers  
Papaya\*  
Parsnip\*  
Patti-Pans  
Peach (not the pip)\*  
Pear (no seeds)\*  
Peas (ordinary garden peas)\*  
Peppers (sweet/salad kind – red, yellow, green)  
Pet Grass  
Plum\*  
Prune (not the pips)\*  
Pumpkin (pips also make great treats)\*  
Raspberry\*  
Rice Cakes (unsalted – plain or multigrain)  
Rocket leaves  
Rose Petals  
Snap/Snow Peas (mangetouts),  
Spinach/Chard (small amount of leaf part only)  
Sprouts (Lentils, Mung beans, micro herbs)  
Strawberry  
Tomato (flesh only)  
Turnip\*  
Water Cress  
Water Melon\*  
Wheat Grass  
Whimzees (dog chews – can be left in the habitat)  
Zucchini (courgette/baby marrow)



\*Dwarf Hamsters should only be given high sugar veg or fruit once a week (marked with \*)

## SAFE PROTEINS

2/3 TIMES PER WEEK

COOKED/STEAMED; PLAIN (NO SALT, SPICES, BUTTER, ETC.); SMALL CUBE PORTIONS.

Beef – Lean/Extra-Lean mince (plain, steamed/cooked)  
Chicken meat (plain, steamed/cooked)  
Crickets (clean & specially bred)  
Egg (hard boiled/ well scrambled)  
Fish (fresh, not tinned; bland, not very salty kinds of fish – steamed/cooked)  
Hills Kitten Chicken Mousse tinned food (not very popular with most)  
Hills Restorative Care (chicken) tinned food

Mealworms (dried or fresh) 3 to 5 at a time  
Royal Canin Mother & Babycat Chicken Mousse tinned food (not very popular with most hams)  
Shrimps (Gammarus) – small fresh water kind.  
Silkworms (dried or fresh 3 to 5 at a time)  
Superworms (dried or fresh) 3 to 5 at a time; chop heads off the live worms first – the jaws are strong and can injure your hamster.  
Turkey meat (plain, steamed/cooked)



# OTHER SAFE FOODS

ONE SMALL PORTION, 1/2 TIMES PER WEEK

- Artichoke (raw flesh only)
- Basil leaf
- Beetroot
- Bread (w/wheat toasted or not)
- Brussels Sprouts
- Celery
- Cheese (only ricotta and low-salt cheeses)
- Chicory
- Coconut (fresh or flakes, not sweetened desiccated)
- Coconut Milk (unsweetened; not cream)
- Coriander (leaves & stems)
- Cornflakes (unsweetened & salt-free)
- Couscous (cooked, plain)
- Cucumber (small piece)
- Dog Biscuits (Plain, home-baked style only)
- Flax/Linseeds - preferably crushed for better absorption and mixed into wet food (quarter tsp)
- Mint leaf
- Oats & Barley flakes (soaked)
- Peanut (in or out of shell).
- Parsley (as a tonic)
- Pasta (pref. cooked, plain)
- Potato (FLESH ONLY; must be really well cooked)
- Provita crackers
- Rice (brown, cooked, plain)
- Sunflower Seeds (hulled only)
- Tofu (rinsed and/or cooked) - high in fat and calcium, so only a tiny piece.
- Weetbix
- Yogurt - tiny amount, plain unsweetened, pref. organic (however, in the case of babies & nursing moms, a daily lick of yogurt is particularly good)



## UNSAFE FOOD LIST

NEVER FEED THESE FOOD ITEMS TO YOUR HAMSTER



- ALL FRUIT SEEDS & PIPS
- Acorns
- Alcohol
- All-Bran Flakes
- Artificial Sweeteners
- Aubergine
- Avocado
- Biltong
- Bindweed
- Bitter Almonds
- Bran
- Brinjal
- Bulbs (of any sort)
- Butter
- Citrus Fruits (lemon, orange, naartjie, etc.)
- Cabbage (particularly stems and veins)
- Cayenne
- Chilli
- Chives
- Chocolate
- Cinnamon
- Coffee and Ceylon Teas
- Coriander seeds
- Cream
- Crocus
- Currants
- Chickpeas (unless REALLY well cooked)
- Deadly Nightshade
- Dragon fruit
- Eggplant
- Elderberry leaves & branches
- Evergreen plants
- Flowers (see [Accessories page](#) on the HSA website )
- Garlic
- Grapefruit
- Grapes
- Greenies (dog chews)
- Ham
- Honey
- Jam
- Jelly
- Kidney Beans (unless REALLY well cooked)
- Laurel
- Leeks
- Lemon
- Lettuce (particularly Iceberg and light green fancy)
- Lime
- Liver
- Milk
- Naartjie
- Nutmeg
- Oak
- Onion (all types)
- Olives
- Orange
- Pepper (spice)
- Pickles
- Pineapple
- Pips from fruits
- Pomegranate
- Pork
- Potato (eyes, leaves, skin, and raw pieces)
- Processed meats (ham, etc.)
- Radish
- Ragwort
- Raisins
- Rhubarb
- Salt
- Seeds from fruits
- Spices
- Sugar
- Sultanas
- Sweet Potato (unless really well-cooked, & flesh only - as a treat)
- Sweets/Candy
- Tomato seeds, green parts & flowers
- Tomato Paste (too strong and concentrated)
- Vinegar

**WHEN IN DOUBT, GO WITHOUT!**