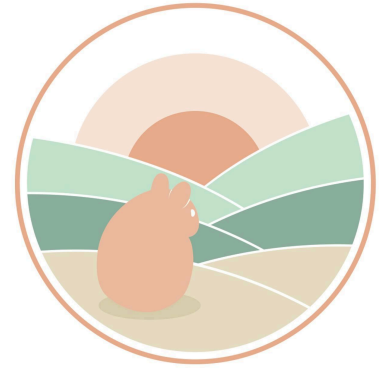


BRIGHT HORIZON HAMSTER RESCUE

CARE GUIDE



BRACHYCEPHALIC SYNDROME

Brachycephalia is a genetic/birth defect in Syrian hamsters, and the result of intensive inbreeding by humans attempting to achieve the “cutest” hamster facial features: large eyes, and a short snout. It is essentially a deformation of the skull.

Brachycephalia is more common in Syrians who have had other “desirable” features bred into their genetic lines: there are far more recorded diagnoses of brachycephalia in longhaireds, and the rarest coat colours.

Brachycephalic, or “brachy” hamsters can look quite different from each other depending on other genetic factors, but will all have three quite distinctive facial features, and share some physical characteristics. They experience a variety of health issues, ranging from mild to severe. Every brachy hamster is different; they will not experience every symptom.

Brachycephalia should be properly diagnosed by an exotics vet. Here we will attempt to help owners identify the surface signs of brachycephalia, and feel a little more informed about the condition and their hamster’s care. This does not replace veterinary advice.

BRACHY HAMSTERS ALL SHARE THESE FACIAL FEATURES:

SHORTENED MUZZLE

Brachy hamsters have an abnormally short snout, often with a larger than usual underbite. Their nose can be upturned, or “Roman” (downturned).

SIDE-SET/PROTRUDING EYES (exophthalmos)

A brachy hamster has a smaller skull. Syrians’ eyes naturally protrude, but in brachy hamsters this is often quite noticeable as more bulging. Their eyes are often, but not always, lower down the skull.

DENTAL ISSUES

Deliberate shortening of a hamster’s jaw causes inevitable problems with teeth: missing, loose or dislodged teeth are common, and incisors are often brittle and prone to breakage. The bottom incisors are sometimes missing: this gives the hamster a “pout”: an exposed bottom gum than can cause their tongue to slightly stick out too. Top teeth can then overgrow as they are not making contact with bottom teeth and being naturally ground down. You vet can “burr” your hamster’s teeth under mild sedation. Never attempt to trim or burr their teeth yourself!

Molars are often absent or malformed, which can cause the hamster issues with chewing the cellulose in plant matter and effect their digestion and nutrient absorption. An x-ray will show the extent of the issue and guide our care.

OTHER COMMON PHYSICAL TRAITS:

LOW BODY MASS

Brachy hams are often smaller and lighter than their non-brachy peers. Maintaining weight is also harder as their teeth are not as strong, and breaking seed shells etc is harder. Chewing can also be affected: molars are often missing too, but this can only be seen when they yawn or under sedation/via x-ray at the vet..

DIGESTION ISSUES

Related to body mass. Brachy hams may appear to have a poor appetite or be “fussy” and selective eaters. This is linked to an inability to properly chew their food: they often appear only partially in control of their bowels, poo more frequently and are messy with where they choose to poo. This is commonly due to partially chewed, thus indigestible food.

“PEDIGREE” LINEAGE

Hamsters bred for show, or to attract higher prices, have often at some point in their genetic history been intensively or unethically inbred. There are statistically more instances of brachycephalia in “privately” bred hamsters than there are in rodent mill hamsters. Some breeders still intentionally breed brachy hamsters, though even the RSPCA will investigate this practice.

BEHAVIOURAL ABNORMALITIES

A Syrian’s brain is designed to fit snugly into a typical Syrian skull. Even then there isn’t a lot of room. An abnormal Syrian skull houses the brain differently - exactly what parts of the brain might be affected depends on the way the skull is shaped.

There’s no rulebook for brachy behaviour, and Syrian neurology hasn’t been researched in enough depth to be specific. Your brachy ham may behave completely typically. They may also behave differently - from acute neurological issues (seizures, lowered intelligence, disorientation and balance issues) to quirks and little traits unique to them.

COMMON HEALTH ISSUES FOR BRACHY HAMSTERS

And how to help your hamster

EATING

Offer your hamster soft foods, and seed mixes that contain few shells or large, hard pieces. You can offer safe baby food, porridge and mashed food alongside softer vegetables, or gently cook their food. Avoiding early damage to teeth will help them to eat relatively normally for longer into their lives. Check teeth very regularly as damage can be sudden.

DRINKING

Brachy jaws can struggle with water bottles. A shallow water bowl is often easier, but experiment to see what works best for your hamster.

GROOMING

Some brachy hams find it difficult to groom and clean themselves because the licking action is affected by their jaw. You can help by brushing them regularly, in a sand bath and with sand if they tolerate it. You can also help to clean their bottoms if they sometimes don’t do a very good job.

EYE ISSUES

Most brachy hams have some degree of eye protrusion, and are more prone to proptosis (the eye becoming detached) and eye infections. Keeping a close watch, and helping very gently to clean their eyes with saline if they become sticky, are very important care steps.

MOBILITY ISSUES

Like all hamsters, individual needs and preferences can vary. The knowledge that your hamster is brachy is useful, but only observing

them and making sure everything is set up for their personal needs will make sure they thrive



CASE STUDY: PIERRE

Pierre came to Bright Horizon after being surrendered to a pet shop because his owners no longer wanted him. Knowledgeable staff there identified that he was brachy, and contacted the rescue.

Pierre was diagnosed by our vet, and “fosterfailed” as a special needs hamster. The prognosis for brachy hamsters is never predictable, and high care and expense mean that, however cute he may be, Pierre is best staying with us.

Pierre is, in reality, a naughty little monkey, very full of energy! He lives in an adapted Eco, which needs frequent cleaning because he is disorganised and poops on anything and everything. He experienced

one bout of rectal bleeding, most likely caused by eating something still in its shell, and after scaring the life out of us made a full recovery.

Pierre’s teeth are currently in good condition, though his underbite is huge. We scatter Chubby Cheeks food for him, which contains no large or hard parts. We offer him fresh soft veg, egg, chicken and soft treats: he eats heartily, but remains under 120g and, under his fluff, feels very boney.

Pierre needs extra help to keep himself clean. He is longhaired, and he can’t completely groom himself because of the shape of his jaw and the position of his tongue.. Having realised this, he rarely bothers! Every couple of days we put him in a trug with clean sand, and brush him with a soft safe brush. He hates it, and much prefers to dash around with matts and lumps of who-knows-what in his fur. The best thing we have found in Pierre’s skirts is a hair clip. We trim the longer sections to help out.

Pierre sees our vet every month to make sure everything still looks good in his mouth, and to check his eyes and bottom.

June 2024: Pierre passed peacefully in his human’s care, after a brief digestive illness. He was loved deeply, and we hope what we learned through caring for him will help other severely brachy hamsters to live longer and better lives.