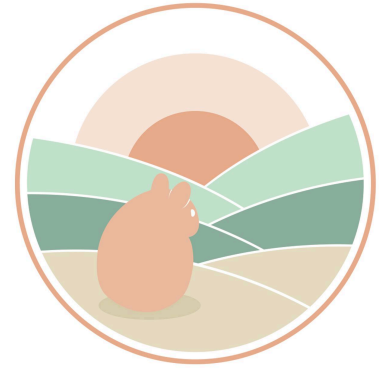


BRIGHT HORIZON HAMSTER RESCUE

CARE GUIDE

Registered Charity 1210796

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Syrian Hamster

Mesocricetus auratus

ABOUT US

Syrian, or Golden Hamsters are the largest of the captive hamster species, and species most people think of when they imagine a “hamster”. More closely related to Turkish/Brandts hamsters than any other species, Syrians have been selectively bred for appearance and temperament for 80 years, resulting in a huge variety of colours and a wide size range, as well as an increasingly short lifespan due to the reduced gene pool.

Originating from northern Syria and southern Turkey, Syrians have a small and threatened wild range. They have recently been classified “Critically Endangered” due to habitat destruction, pesticides and human conflict. Reserves have been evacuated or destroyed. The captive Syrian hamster population is not genetically resilient enough to be used in repopulation efforts. Like guinea pigs, it may soon be that none remain in the wild.

You can find out more about their wild habits here, but here are some quick facts: <https://animalia.bio/syrian-hamster?taxonomy=212>

Average size:	13 -18cm
Weight range:	100 - 220g (140-180g is typical)
Lifespan:	2 - 2.5 years (longer life expectancy in proper care)
Diet:	Omnivore
Waking cycle:	Crepuscular (most alert at dusk and dawn)
Homes:	Solitary, deep burrows (females build more complex burrows)

HAMSTER CARE: TIMES ARE CHANGING

The popularity of Syrian hamsters grew alongside their false reputation for being low maintenance pets that are happy in small cages.

Nothing could be further from the truth: the widely-held idea of a “good hamster cage” in the UK meets virtually none of a Syrian’s needs. The vast majority of mass-marketed cages are far too small, or dangerous by design. Stress behaviours - bar biting, bar climbing/monkeybarring, and cage aggression are all products of the very poor care promoted by most UK pet shops.

In recent years, much more has become understood about the needs of Syrian hamsters; research studies have proven the need for large enclosures, deep bedding, larger wheels and suitable enrichment. The PDSA and Blue Cross now promote proper care, with the RSPCA (part-funded by the Pets at Home Foundation) expected to follow once Pets at Home improve their range: often what newcomers

first see and buy. Even after “High Street” changes, the danger of tiny import cages on shopping sites will remain, until welfare standards are regulated and enforced.

SYRIANS AS COMPANIONS

Syrians are complex and characterful individuals; every single one is unique in their personality and preferences. One litter of Syrian babies can contain every temperament imaginable. Getting to know your own little friend is part of the joy of the species.

All Syrians, whatever their nature, need the same essential equipment and enrichment. What you need to bring to their lives to keep their busy and curious minds active is all to be discovered. To be friends with your Syrian, you need to first create a living space in which they feel safe, secure, able to fulfil their natural instincts and thrive.

We’ll help you make your Syrian’s home completely suited to their needs, but first, let’s bust some myths!





SYRIAN HAMSTERS MUST NOT LIVE TOGETHER IN CAPTIVITY

This is an inarguable fact, often ignored by breeders, pet shop sellers and owners, with tragic results.

In the wild, Syrian hamsters live in solitary burrows. They are extremely territorial, and will fight, often to the death, for space and resources. They come together purely to mate: females commonly hold long-term extensive territories, with males moving on regularly, searching for a mate. If a female is in heat - roughly every four days, for around four days - she may permit a male to stay with her during her heat cycle but will chase him away as soon as she is pregnant or her heat cycle ends. Syrian pups are weaned by 21 days, and tolerated for up to 8 weeks by the mother, who will then start to become aggressive towards them.

If forced to share a cage beyond puberty, the usual eventual outcome is a fatal fight. An uneasy truce is sometimes established, causing severe trauma and behavioural damage and reduced lifespan due to stress hormones. In rescue, we have sadly seen this play out countless times.

SYRIAN HAMSTERS DO NOT BITE UNLESS THEY ARE TERRIFIED

Only a frightened or traumatised Syrian will bite. Handled properly, respectfully and gently, a Syrian has no reason for defensive aggression or to feel scared in their home. They are very often keen for your attention and happy to be scooped up for a cuddle and exercise. They quickly learn that your hands mean treats, attention and most importantly, time out of the enclosure.

Syrian body language is very easy to understand, and you'll receive plenty of warning before those incisors come out. Syrians will display their teeth and "chatter" if they're not in the mood. Caught off-guard, they will flip or twist over and "show hands" as a warning. They hate to be woken, have their nests or scent-marked possessions disturbed, and to be chased and grabbed. A bit like humans!

SYRIANS DO NOT MAKE GOOD FIRST PETS/ PETS FOR CHILDREN

Syrians are complicated animals with all sorts of likes and dislikes. They're also crepuscular - late risers - and burrow-based. Caring for them, handling them, letting them out to explore, and spot-cleaning their homes without annoying them is a responsible task, and requires good supervision. Their enclosures take up a lot of space. We urge parents/carers to do their research and get advice before considering a hamster for a child's companion.

FEMALE SYRIANS ARE NOT ALWAYS DEMANDING

ALL Syrians can be "difficult": they're an active and curious species who really need and enjoy time outside of their enclosure. Keeping them content in their enclosure is their human's job: some prefer nothing to change, others need regular new enrichment.

In nature, females are dominant and hold larger, long-term territories, building extensive multi-chambered burrows for rearing pups. Males tend to build less inventive burrows, but there are always exceptions.

It's common, but far from a rule, for a female to become more active during her heat cycle: the urge to find a mate is strong, manifesting itself as an urge to get out and about! Plenty of free roam and attention is the key.

There are plenty of males who are just as, if not more demanding for attention, and there are females who are very reserved and content. Any Syrian, regardless of sex, is a time commitment: hamsters who have been cared for in home foster are a wise choice for anyone who likes to know what they're letting themselves in for!

SMALL HAMSTER, SMALL SPACE?

The complete opposite.

In nature, Syrian hamsters find and aggressively hold a territory large enough to provide them with enough food. In their natural landscape this needs to be a large space, and there are constant fights for resources. They've evolved to respect scent markers, and can obsessively overmark a small space, causing inflammation and infection of the scent glands on a male's flanks.

In smaller cages, there isn't enough space to fit everything a Syrian needs to be content. 28cm+ wheels, deep-enough bedding, large hides, a mix of substrates and plenty of foraging space are essential for their wellbeing.

Syrians are also the species most prone to biting bars (causing facial injuries and tooth damage) and bar climbing/monkeybarring (risking fall injuries and "bumblefoot", a bacterial infection that can permanently damage their feet). Barless enclosures are usually best.

Syrians need at least 100 x 50cm of unbroken floorspace, just like all other captive hamsters. More is recommended.

HOW DO I CREATE A PERFECT SYRIAN HAMSTER ENCLOSURE?

The minimum requirements, and a little more detail:

100 x 50cm+ enclosure: bigger is ALWAYS better, ESPECIALLY FOR SYRIANS.

Barless highly recommended, or under 1cm bar width, with screening so the bedding can be at least 30cm deep.

28cm+ wheel: A Syrian's back should not be bent in the wheel: it causes long term spinal damage

Large sand bath/ area: Syrians love bathing, digging and rolling in sand - as well as peeing neatly in it!

At least 30% deep burrowing substrate (30cm minimum): Syrians - especially females - build deep and complex burrows

Substrate that holds tunnels: a mix of soft (eg: Kaytee), Megazorb and hemp (eg: Aubiose) holds burrows perfectly

Digging substrates: Syrians enjoy exploring and digging in coco soil, beech chips, cork chips, cork bark pieces

A multichamber hide (MCH): the closest artificial recreation of a Syrian burrow, with chambers for sleeping, toilet, stashing food

Multiple hides/clutter: Syrians use hides for multiple purposes, and enjoy small safe spaces

A varied, optimal diet: we can help you to get this right - as a rescue we use Chubby Cheeks Hamster Food

Sprays/Forage: Syrians spend hours searching for and stashing food. A variety of sprays and forage are essential enrichment.



SYRIAN HAMSTER TIPS FROM THE BRIGHT HORIZON FOSTER TEAM

Syrians love homemade boredom-breakers, there are loads of cheap and easy ones

There is nothing more welcoming and heartwarming than your Syrian waiting for you

Some Syrians prefer not to be picked up from their enclosure with hands; use a familiar pot/carrier that they learn to associate with time out of the cage

Most Syrians wee in their sand - have a lot of sand to hand and no wooden sand baths, they get a bit smelly!

Syrians can smell each other from literally a mile away - if you have more than one and they are going a bit nuts, increasing the distance between their houses can help a bit

Syrians love their big wheels so much they'll nest in them! Encourage them to burrow by burying their stash in the deep bedding.

