

Bright Horizon Hamster Rescue

A rescue charity dedicated to improving the lives of hamsters across the UK

Hamster charity calls for more understanding of 'ethical care'

A hamster charity is urging pet stores and their staff across the UK to embrace and promote a more ethical approach when it comes to the care of these popular pets. **Rebecca Nottingham** reports

Bright Horizon Rescue, a charity dedicated to improving the lives of hamsters across the UK, is urging pet stores and their staff to help change the mentality around the welfare of hamsters and other small mammals.

The charity, which was set up to spread awareness of best practice when it comes to caring for the small rodents and rescue those in need of shelter or medical attention, defines ethical care as "the practice of caring for hamsters in the way that scientific research has proven meets their welfare needs".

Bright Horizon's guidance

and advice on hamster care is based on up-to-date science-led research and standards.

"We need to change the mentality surrounding the welfare of hamsters, and small mammals in general in the UK," a Bright Horizon Charity spokesperson said. "That has to come from the places where the public see, and buy, their normal hamster care products."

Hamsters became popular as pets in the 1970s and 80s. At the time, very little was known about the species – which had previously mainly been used in laboratories – and the equipment sold was, according to Bright

Horizon "an extension of basic lab equipment".

"The ethical care community has been battling to bring all of the hamster behaviour studies to public attention," the charity said.

"Without consumer pressure, most retailers will not change their profitable ranges. Many procure years in advance and would take a huge hit on contracts with manufacturers by reneging on those agreements.

The problem lies as much with the manufacture and availability of unsuitable housing as it does with the retailers."

As well as advocating much larger enclosures, the charity gives advice on topics such as correct diet, running wheel sizes for specific species and what natural materials to use to build thick layers of substrates for hamsters to burrow in. Importantly, it also identifies and highlights products that are not suitable for hamsters.

The charity said: "Manufacturers began producing more appealing cages and accessories and the distress behaviours the hamsters showed – such as bar chewing and climbing – were rapidly accepted as their natural behaviour.

"That 'normal' has not progressed in line with the findings of scientific studies as we discovered more about the species' behaviours. To this day, popular understanding of hamster care evokes images of small plastic cages, tiny squeaky wheels and sawdust, and we need to change this."

Bright Horizon is urging retailers to work with charities like them to change hamster welfare in the UK for the better by changing the products it sells in line with its guidance.

"Everything we do is aimed at giving hamsters the enrichment that they would have in their natural environment," the Bright Horizon spokesperson said.

"Help us to turn the tide. Science has clearly told us what hamsters need as a bare minimum. There is actual evidence of harm and death caused to hamsters by unsafe products. Please, only sell the products that have long been scientifically proven to be safe and suitable for hamsters." ■

“We need to change the mentality surrounding the welfare of hamsters”

KEY ETHICAL HAMSTER CARE POINTS

- Enclosures must be 100cm x 50cm x 50cm for Russian and Roborovski dwarf hamsters and 100cm x 50cm x 50cm for Syrian and Chinese species.
- Species specific-sized exercise wheel.
- Hamsters require at least 20cm of deep bedding as they are burrowing animals.
- Enclosures must be full of enrichment featuring items such as hides, tunnels and forage sprays.