

1. Hamster Pregnancy and Litter Size

1.1 How old should hamsters be before mating them?

Syrian (non-dwarf) hamsters should be 12 - 13 weeks (about 3 months) old for best results. Dwarf hamsters should be 3 - 4 months old. If the mother is too young, she may not produce enough milk for her babies. Also, a very young mother can sometimes be so stressed that she may kill her own babies.

Even though some books say females up to 18 months of age can have babies, from my personal experience, I would not recommend mating a female over 9-10 months old, just to be safe. I have had two bad experiences with hamster mothers just over 12 months old. In one case, a previously successful mother had one large stillborn baby and then she died. In the other case, the mother had four babies, one with a leg deformity, which died, and then the mother died of malnutrition. Her body couldn't seem to recover from giving birth.

1.2 How often is a female in heat (ready to mate)? How can I tell when a hamster is in heat?

A female is in heat about every four days, usually at night. If you are observant, you will notice signs when she is receptive to mating. When she is near a male or smells his scent (on your hands, for example, if you handled him before handling her), she will flatten her body and become as "stiff as a board." I like to refer to her as being "frozen" at this point. This indicates that she is ready, willing, and able to be receptive to a male who wants to mate with her. If you keep track of her mating cycle, you will know which days are best to try getting her together with a male.

1.3 What's the best way to get a hamster pregnant (if the male and female don't live together)?

There are several options, but this is my favorite method. I prefer to let them get to know each other gradually, such as let both of them run around in hamster balls near each other. They will sniff each other, follow each other, and even call out to each other in squeaks. Because they are enclosed in a safe area (the ball), neither one will get hurt if they are not feeling "friendly" towards each other at the time.

When the female shows mating readiness (see question 1.2 above), then put the male together with her in a neutral place, e.g. on the floor, in a box, in a cage (preferably one free of distractions like food). If they show signs of fighting, separate them. However, if you have determined her mating cycle correctly, the odds are good that she will happily cooperate with the male.

You do not need to do anything, except make sure they are safe and separate them when they are finished. The male hamster will mate with the female, who remains completely "frozen" throughout, for about 10 - 20 minutes. In my experience, hamsters are very fertile - they tend to get pregnant the first time.

I know that some books say to put them together overnight for mating, but I've always found a few minutes on the right day is sufficient and lessens any risk of fighting, since you can watch them carefully the entire time.

1.4 How can I tell if my hamster is pregnant?

It's hard to determine whether a hamster is pregnant based on her body size, right up until a couple days before delivering. Then, especially with a large litter, she can look huge and LUMPY. By then it's obvious. But if she is a new hamster, which means she is growing quickly, she could just be gaining weight for other reasons.

Here is some information I got from a book:

"You will soon be able to tell whether or not the mating is was successful. You will know, not so much because of the increase in the female's girth, which is very minor and therefore hard to detect for a novice hamster keeper, but because of her changed behavior. She starts hoarding more than ever and digging around in her nest, busily carrying nesting material in and out. She is obviously reconditioning it and lining the inside with fresh, soft padding. If she deems the sleeping house too small to server as nursery, she will build a separate birthing nest outside. Some females are more nervous and jumpy at this time than usual.

What you should do during the gestation period:

1. Make plenty of nesting material available.
2. Be especially calm and gentle when handling the expectant mother.
3. Don't let strangers near her.
4. Avoid loud noises.
5. Feed a diet rich in vitamins and proteins.
6. Change the bedding one last time two days before the due date (don't touch the nest!). Then leave the female completely alone except for feeding her." Note: I usually lift out the nest, shake out any droppings, and then set it aside. Then I clean the cage thoroughly and put the saved nest back inside.

~ From: Hamsters: A Complete Pet Owner's Manual by Otto von Frisch

1.5 How long is a hamster pregnant? When will she have her babies?

For a Syrian (non-dwarf) hamster, the length of gestation (pregnancy) averages 16 days. For dwarf hamsters, gestation is about 19 - 22 days.

1.6 What is the average litter size?

Syrian hamsters have 6 - 10 babies, on average, and dwarf hamsters, around 5 - 6 babies.

Hamsters can have as many as 16 babies (or more). Pikachu had her paws full with 13 babies. We were very pleased that all of them survived. Pikachu became really thin for a while, and I was worried about her health. That's why I fed her formula. Luckily, by the ninth day, the babies started eating some soft foods, and Pikachu was able to gain back some weight and strength.

1.7 How often should a hamster give birth?

The mother should be allowed at least six weeks between litters to regain her strength. She should not have more than six litters altogether during her life. That was according to a book, but I think two or three litters are plenty for any mother.

2. New Hamster Litter

2.1 My hamster just had babies. What should I do?

If the father is in the cage, and they are NOT dwarf hamsters, REMOVE THE FATHER IMMEDIATELY.

Syrian (non-dwarf) hamsters are not supposed to live together as adults. It is particularly dangerous for a father to be in the cage with babies. If you allow this to happen, do not be surprised if the whole litter "disappears" one by one.

Despite the fact that dwarf hamster fathers can help raise the babies, the risk of a second pregnancy almost right away is very high, so again, I recommend removing the father from the cage. Otherwise, the mother may have a second litter before the first litter is ready to be weaned, risking both her health and the lives of the new litter.

The mother hamster will do most of the caring for the babies. You mostly need to give her some privacy and extra nutrition. Make sure that your hamster has plenty of bedding to make a nice nest and keep the babies warm. Keep the cage away from any drafts. I would also recommend getting a book or two on hamsters (see my recommended books section).

You must resist the urge to disturb the new mother and babies. You can secretly peek at them from time to time, but do not make a lot of noise, reach into the cage without a good reason, or touch the babies. This can have dire consequences. You can make the mother so upset or nervous that she kills or eats her babies.

If you want to count the babies, take a picture, or just get a better look at them, wait until the mother leaves the nest on her own for some reason. Then very carefully and quietly, look or take your picture. If the mother seems very nervous, stop what you're doing immediately and try another time. You don't want to spook her. Some mothers are very relaxed about these things and others, especially very young mothers, are terribly nervous. Be observant and respect your hamster's personality preferences.

What you can do, though, is provide extra nourishment for the mother, especially if she has a large litter. Read on...

2.2 What foods should I give the new mother?

Make sure the mother is getting plenty of her regular dry food, water, and treats, such as vegetables, fruits, and breads.

In addition, I have found it helpful to give the mother a little bit of milk or formula once or twice daily. This can be by dropper, in a shallow dish (like a peanut butter jar lid), or as a piece of milk-soaked bread. It can be regular milk or low-iron (human) infant formula. I have also heard that KMR, a milk replacer for kittens (found at PetVetSupply.com or PetSmart.com), can be used, but I have not tried this myself. If you use powder formula or KMR, mix it up in normal proportions according to the directions, but in very small amounts. You have to be careful that none is left in the cage to spoil. Remove any undrunk milk or uneaten milk-soaked bread after a short while.

As an extra source of protein, you may wish to offer a small bit of cooked egg. Again, to prevent spoilage, remove any uneaten portions as soon as possible.

2.3 When can I touch the babies?

When the babies are 2 to 3 weeks old, you can begin touching them and work up to holding them for short periods of time. Beware, though, because they may be afraid and bite you (it feels like a pinch). Also, I once had a litter where every time we held a baby, it peed on us, LOL. If a baby does this, be careful not to drop it or hurt it in surprise.

For at least the first 2 weeks, I would caution you not to touch the babies or the nest and to only touch the mother or cage, if necessary. The best thing you can do is leave them alone and just watch them. This is because a new hamster mother can get so distressed from noise or being disturbed that she would kill her babies.

You can peek at the baby hamsters, if you can do it without disturbing the mother. Don't open the cage or move anything around. Just quietly look in. And listen too - the babies' cries and squeaks sound like seagulls, I think. Sometimes the mother leaves the nest for food or water. Then you can really see the babies. They're so tiny and pink, at first, and then gradually start to develop fur.

2.4 I found a dead baby in the cage. What should I do?

Remove the dead baby immediately, but try not to touch anything or leave your scent. You should use a plastic glove or a plastic bag over your hand.

If you do not remove the baby, the mother, and even the other babies (if they are old enough), may eat it. This is nature's way of keeping the area sanitary and it also gives them some protein. However, it is always best to remove the dead yourself, if you can.

2.5 Why would a hamster mother kill or eat her babies?

There are multiple reasons why a mother might kill or eat her babies:

1. **STRESS** – Many things can cause stress in a new mother hamster, including: disturbing her and her babies, age of the mother (she's too young), or leaving a Syrian (non-dwarf) hamster father with the litter. In the last case, the mother or the father might be responsible for the babies' deaths. ***Never leave a father Syrian hamster with the mother and babies!***
2. **NUTRIENT DEFICIENCY** – If the mother hamster is lacking nutrients, such as protein, she might eat the babies to fill that dietary need. To avoid this, supplement a new mother's diet with extra vegetables and milk or low-iron infant formula. This is especially important if there are a lot of babies.
3. **BIRTH DEFECT/INJURY** – Hamster moms have a sixth sense about their babies and seem to innately know if something is wrong. In that case, she may kill the defective baby as a natural instinct. Also, if a baby is injured and bleeds, even an originally healthy baby, she may respond to the smell of blood and kill the baby by instinct.
4. **SANITARY NEEDS** – A hamster mother will often eat a dead (or dying) baby to prevent having a rotting body around her nest. ***If you notice that there is a dead baby in the cage, you should remove it as soon as possible.***

2.6 Is it okay for the mother hamster to leave her babies alone?

Some hamster mothers stay with their new babies most of the time; others seem to go out on their own and leave the babies more often. As long as she covers them to keep them warm and comes back frequently to nurse them, they should be okay. I guess some moms just need longer breaks from their babies (just like people).

2.7 Is it normal for the mother to move her nest and babies from place to place?

Some hamster moms like to change nest locations more frequently than others. I think they may be looking for the safest, warmest place for their little ones. Also, it's possible that the nest has become soiled, and the mother would like to move to a cleaner area.

Sometimes a hamster mom does strange things, that almost seem careless, but overall if she is nursing her babies and keeping them warm and safe, then she is within the norm of hamster parenting. There's a wide variation of how carefully moms care for their babies. From my experience, the babies seem a lot hardier than you would think.

2.8 What do you feed baby hamsters?

If they are less than nine or ten days old, they will get their nutrition from their mother's milk. After that, they will appreciate some soft foods, like breads, cooked or grated veggies, or fruits, but will also continue to nurse from their mother.

At around 2 weeks old, they will start eating some of the regular hamster food (seeds and pellets) that their mother eats. Be prepared to buy a lot of hamster food. You will probably be very surprised at how much they will eat!

At around 4 weeks of age they will be eating the normal hamster food mix, veggies, and fruits and no longer need their mother's milk. They should be drinking plenty of water from the water bottle by that time too.

2.9 How do I take care of orphaned hamster babies?

My first advice would be to consult a veterinarian. But in lieu of that, you could try calling a pet store for advice. The closer the babies are to being independent, the better chance you will have of being successful in hand raising them. If the babies have begun to eat solid foods (about 10 to 14 days old), they have a much better chance.

Using an eyedropper, feed the babies a little kitten's milk, such as Whiska's or KMR, found in pet stores (or online at PetVetSupply.com or PETSMAART.com). If you can't find those, you can try low-iron infant formula. In some stores, you can find a KMR Emergency Kit, which includes a dropper and instructions, along with the KMR formula.

After feeding the babies, gently stroke their tummies to encourage digestion and elimination. You can use a moist cotton ball for this or rub lightly with your finger. This process would normally be done by their mother licking their tummies.

Supplement the formula with lots of soft foods, like grated or cooked veggies, breads, and small pieces of fruit. Have plenty of dry food and water available. Keep the babies together in a nice, warm nest. They will help to keep each other warm.

One positive thing about hand-raised babies is that they are used to human touch much sooner and can become quite attached to you.



If you would like to read a personal account of one person's success story in saving a young hamster baby, go to: kathyskritters.com/tales/faq/will.html.

2.10 When can you clean out the cage of a hamster litter?

Wait about 10 to 14 days at least, longer if the mother seems nervous.

When you clean the cage, it might be a good idea to separate the mother from the babies for that short time. She may be happy to run in her ball, for example. Otherwise, she can become quite concerned with what is happening to her nest and babies and may run around frantically trying to fix the problem.

As long as the babies are about 2 weeks old, it is okay to touch them. You can pick them up by the scruff of their neck and carefully set them back down. I would handle them as little as possible at this point.

Put the babies together to keep warm, leaving as much of the original nest with them as possible. Then clean the cage, put in fresh bedding, food and water, and return the nest and babies back to where they originally were. When the mother is put back in, she may be distracted by the new food, which can serve to calm her down. Hopefully, she will go back to the babies and nurse them as soon as possible after that.

2.11 Can I leave the father hamster with the mother and babies?

Definitely not! A Syrian hamster father could harm his babies or make the mother nervous enough to do so. A dwarf hamster father could impregnate the female again far too soon.

2.12 When can I put the father hamster back in the cage?

If they are Syrian (not dwarf) hamsters, NEVER. Syrian hamsters must live alone. Otherwise, serious fighting or death can result. If they lived in the wild, they would live solitary lives, so you don't need to worry that they would feel lonely. They are meant to live alone and are very stressed if they have to share a home.

A dwarf hamster father can be returned to live with the female a few weeks after her litter is weaned. Don't return him too soon or she may have another litter before she regains her strength. There should be at least six weeks, preferably longer, between litters for her to recuperate. Be careful, though, if you keep putting the male and female together, you will soon have a houseful of hamsters!

2.13 How do you tell the difference between female and male babies?

The females are easy to tell before the fur grows all the way in. Wait until they are 2 to 3 weeks old and gently pick them up by the scruff of their neck. Look at their little tummies. If there are two rows of pink dots (their nipples), then they are girls.

If you prefer to see some photos demonstrating the difference, this is a great web page: www.petwebsite.com/sexing.htm.

2.14 When should I separate the babies?

If they are dwarf hamsters, they can live together, as long as they have a large enough living space. You would need to separate the boys from the girls by 4 to 5 weeks old, though, unless you want a population explosion!

If not dwarfs, then the babies can stay together with the mother until they are weaned (no longer drinking her milk), which is when they are about 4 to 5 weeks old. The babies should be separated by sex (boys in one cage and girls in another). Within a few weeks after that (earlier if there is serious fighting), you should have a separate cage for each hamster. That is a good time to give them away to their new owners.

Once, I had five hamsters at the same time, each in their own cage. Even though they couldn't live together, they were very interested in each other. We used to put them in their balls to run around, and they would stop their balls close together, sniff each other, and even do some squeaking at each other, kind of a "mating call." It was very cute. But we NEVER put them together in one place, even though two of them were sisters. Please don't make that mistake; it could prove fatal!

2.15 Could I leave a hamster baby girl with her mother? Can I put a male baby with his father? Can I keep two male babies or two female babies together?

Only if they are dwarf hamsters. Otherwise, the answers are NO, NO, and NO! Syrian (non-dwarf) hamsters must live in separate homes. They are solitary creatures and may fight or kill each other if they are kept together.

As far as putting any babies in with the daddy, definitely not. That dad is mature and ready to be alone for the rest of his days. He would not appreciate suddenly having to share his home with others again and could very seriously hurt or kill any hamster that is put in his cage.

You must have a cage for each hamster you keep. They really can only live alone. Putting two together might work for a while, but then WHAM! Their squabbling could get out of hand and one or both could get hurt (or worse). It is in their nature to live alone, and their instincts could cause a lot of grief if they are put in a cage with another hamster. Each hamster needs his own territory and will defend that. I have heard of other people, who didn't know any better, sometimes succeeding with this, but I would never try it or recommend it, because I want my (and your) hamsters to be happy and safe.

Dwarf hamsters are the exception, though. You can keep two together (usually females) and they enjoy it. If you wish to keep a male and female dwarf hamster pair together indefinitely, you must be prepared for the inevitable hamster population explosion!

2.16 At what age should I give the babies away to their new homes?

You can give the babies away when they are weaned from their mother (no longer need to drink her milk).

Watch to see when she ceases to nurse her babies. This is usually around 4 to 5 weeks. Some moms seem like they would be happy to nurse their babies forever, and some will begin the weaning process as early as 3 weeks. It depends on the mother's personality. Since the babies need to be separated by sex at 5 weeks old, that is a good time to give them to their new owners.

3. Hamster Baby Development

3.1 When do hamster babies open their eyes?

The books say their eyes will open between 12 and 16 days old. Some of Pikachu's litter started to open their eyes at 13 days old. Each litter, and even each baby, develops a bit differently. When they first open their little eyes, it seems like they are squinting because the eyes are only slightly open. Gradually over a few days, they will be able to open their eyes wider and wider.

3.2 Why is the babies' fur so dark when the parents' fur isn't?

The fur that comes in right away is usually darker than it will be later. It's a special kind of fur called a guard-coat. It may turn darker later if the hamster is going to have black or brown fur. The exception is that babies that are going to have white fur look pink at first, until the fur grows in.

Sometimes the babies look like the mother, father, or both. Other times, a baby looks totally different, maybe like a grandparent or great-grandparent. You never know. It is very exciting to see what the babies look like after the first couple of weeks!

If you look at the last page of my hamster journal, the Epilogue, you can see that Calvin had very dark brown fur originally, and then it turned to a light tan later.

4. New Pet Hamster

4.1 What is a Syrian hamster? What is the difference between Syrian and Dwarf hamsters?

A Syrian hamster, also called a golden hamster, is basically any of the non-dwarf hamster varieties sold as pets. In pet stores, you'll see such varieties as golden, teddy bear, satin, black bear, and others. Dwarf hamsters are much smaller reaching a maximum length of only 3-4 inches, whereas Syrians are about 6-7 inches when they are fully grown.



Dwarf Hamster



**Syrian Hamster
"Teddy Bear" variety**



**Syrian Hamster
Short haired, banded variety**

Following are some of the main differences between dwarf and Syrian hamsters:

Dwarf Hamsters	Syrian Hamsters
3 - 4 inches (8 - 10 cm) maximum length	6 - 7 inches (15 - 17 cm) maximum length
Fewer colors: brown-grey, blue-grey, sandy-brown	Many colors: black, tan, golden brown, rust, cinnamon, white, grey, cream, and many other shades in between
Dorsal stripe: pronounced dark stripe running down their back from their head to their tail	No dorsal stripe, although they may have some similar looking features
Not banded	May have a white band or white blotches or spots
Varieties: Dwarf Campbell's Russian Hamster, Dwarf Winter White Russian, Chinese Hamster, Roborovski Hamster	Varieties: Golden, Fancy, Satin, Teddy Bear, Black Bear
Average lifespan: 2 years (1.5 - 3, depending on which variety)	Average lifespan: 2- 3 years
Dwarfs can live together or in small groups	Syrians are solitary. They should not be housed together unless they are young babies.

4.2 Are hamsters good pets for children?

Hamsters can be tricky with very young children. Older children will probably be fine with a pet hamster if you train them to handle it gently and respect its needs and wishes, but younger children should be continually supervised with the hamster. One concern is that young children can be impulsive or careless, which could inadvertently scare the hamster and end up with the hamster and/or child being hurt. Hamster bites are like razor cuts, because hamsters have very sharp front teeth. The bites aren't that deep, but they definitely draw blood and cause significant pain. If a hamster is treated in an ungentle way, it will learn to be more aggressive and possibly become a biter. The child may not be deliberately cruel, but a young child doesn't always realize, for example, when he/she is squeezing a hamster.

That said, I got my first hamster when my boys were 7 and 4 1/2. However, I considered it as much (or more) my pet as theirs. I supervised my boys with the hamster at all times and I spent many hours befriending the hamster, so as to make him very tame and friendly. If you think that is something you would also do, then a hamster could be a very good pet for your household. I have enjoyed over a decade of having hamsters in my family.

One other consideration is that hamsters are nocturnal, so after its initial youthful period, your hamster will spend much of its day sleeping. Many hamsters don't mind being awakened during the day for treats or to play, but keep in mind that you should give it some time to wake up fully and never surprise it in its sleep by sticking your hand in (hence the importance of careful supervision of children, who tend to be more abrupt). That act can cause even the friendliest hamster to snap or bite.

In addition, make sure children wash their hands before (and after) handling hamsters, since a hamster might smell some delicious food on their hands and take a painful nibble just to check.

Finally, the most important thing is how much a hamster would be loved in your house. If all of you want a hamster, and everyone is aware of a hamster's needs and is willing to provide them, then I think a hamster would be very lucky to join your family.

4.3 What kind of hamster should I get?

I think the one in the pet store that seems special to you is best. Each time I buy a new hamster, I choose one with a new, unique look, or at least one that I haven't had in a while. I'm partial to the teddy bears, the fluffier the better.

I have never had a dwarf hamster. They are very cute and can live in pairs, unlike other hamsters, but I've heard they sometimes are not as friendly and they have a very slight odor (kind of like mice). On the other hand, many people are extremely happy with them and especially like to get two together. If you want to keep two hamsters in one cage, then dwarf hamsters are the best (and only) choice. However, if you get a male and female, the inevitable babies will come along, over and over and over again, until you separate them. So I would suggest two of the same sex, unless you are prepared for a population explosion and have plenty of new homes and/or cages for all of the new hamsters.

You can check out photos of all my hamsters in my Hamster Gallery at: kathyskritters.com/tales/hgallery/index.html.

4.4 Do hamsters get lonely and like companions, that is, should we buy one or two?

I remember asking this same question when I bought my first hamster. This is extremely important to remember – Syrian hamsters, which are all non-dwarf varieties, do NOT need a companion and do not get lonely. They MUST live alone (except for mothers while raising their babies). People make this mistake all the time, thinking, if the hamsters seem to get along for a while, then it must

be okay. But then one day, they find their hamsters have been fighting and are hurt (or worse). I've done a lot of reading about hamsters over the years. If they lived in the wild, they would not live together and would only seek out another hamster just to mate. They are solitary creatures and are very happy that way.

On the other hand, it is a lot of fun to have two hamsters, but in separate cages, especially two of the opposite sex. They are VERY interested in who that other hamster is across the room and how they could get over to see him or her. They even call out to each other in special squeaks, especially when the female is in heat. If you put each one in a hamster ball and let it run around on the floor, they will "have a ball" (pun intended), bumping into each other and sniffing each other. However, they each need to live in their own cage. If you were to get two hamsters and two cages, you could mate them at some point and raise a hamster family for a little while. That is both educational and fun for the whole family. But of course, then you have to figure out what to do with the babies. Sometimes pet stores will take them, if they have room. Many times, you can find friends or relatives who would love to adopt one of the babies. We were lucky enough to find homes for all of the hamster babies we've had.

4.5 You said that Syrian hamsters can't live together, but then why are they in the same cage in the pet store?

This is a common misconception. Pet stores sell young hamsters, usually around 2 to 3 months old. These hamsters are still babies and are not yet mature. At that age, most will live cooperatively with their siblings. However, as they get older and reach full maturity, their natural instinct of living alone comes out. At this point, they may start fighting with any other hamsters in the same cage. It's especially dangerous for a new father hamster to be in with the mother and babies.

Once the babies are weaned, it is possible to separate the boys and girls into two cages and keep them together for a little longer. But you must realize that they can't stay like that forever. Even as young babies, you probably will have observed them play-fighting. This play-fighting escalates as they age, and soon can lead to fighting which causes injuries. It's best to separate them before they fight hard enough to really get hurt. That's why I would recommend leaving them together only for 6-8 weeks, at most. You never know when the fighting will start to turn serious.

Another thing to be careful of is when you separate them and end up with groups of two, or maybe even three. The smaller groups tend to start fighting more seriously, perhaps to establish dominance or territory. In a large group, they may not seem all that competitive, but when there are two, it may turn into one against the other.

4.6 What's your favorite hamster cage?

My favorite cage is the Habitrail Home. I also like the S.A.M. Country Club Kit. I really do not like the wire cages at all. They are dangerous, because the hamster tends to climb up to the top and fall too often. I know of a hamster that died, because he broke his leg that way.

My favorite wheel is the Habitrail Whirl-a-Wheel. I think the S.A.M. Work-Out Wheel is too noisy.

I love to use lots of plastic connecting tunnels, especially to connect more than one cage, to give the hamster more room to run around.

I actually have two Habitrail Homes, a S.A.M. Country Club, and a Habitrail Villa (I think). They are all linked together by tunnels, mostly S.A.M. tunnels, but a few Habitrail items too. You can see my current cage setup, as shown in Hermione's Great Adventure, at:

kathyskritters.com/tales/hadventure/page02.html

4.7 Do hamster cages by different brands have interchangeable parts?

The Habitrail and S.A.M. cage parts all seem to fit together well, but I don't know about other brands. I used to have an off-brand cage many years ago, which did not fit with the S.A.M. tunnels, except with some sort of adaptor pieces. I'm glad to be rid of that, because it was a pain. Since the most common cage parts I see in stores are made by S.A.M. and Habitrail, I think these two choices will suffice.

4.8 Where can I shop for pet supplies online?

Some good internet pet supply stores are Petsmart.com, Petco.com, and ArcataPet.com. I'm sure that there are others, but I can personally vouch for these.

4.9 Do hamsters like to be in a quiet room or right in the hub of the household activity?

I don't think hamsters necessarily need to be kept in a quiet place. I like to keep ours in the hub of activity, so he gets more attention. I have two sons, and even without extra friends around, our household has had its share of noisy times. Most of the time this doesn't even wake the hamster out of his daily slumber. The noises that seem to awaken pet hamsters are crinkly bag food noises or talking to them in a special voice you reserve just for them. In other words, something that makes them think "TREATS" usually gets them moving. Screaming kids barely get an occasional yawn.

4.10 What is the best way to tame a new pet hamster?

It is best to be very gentle and gradually work up to handling your new pet hamster. Here are a few suggestions from me:

1. First of all, wash your hands before handling the hamster. You don't want him to think your finger is a piece of food!
2. Ease into handling the hamster slowly. First, offer a piece of food to him. Maybe he won't take it from your hand the first few times, but he will know (by smell) that it was you who were so nice to him. Later, try to hold the food patiently, waiting to see if he will come up to you and take it from your hand. After a couple days, he should start to become more comfortable with this.
3. Instead of reaching into the cage and picking up the hamster with your hands, which can be very scary to a new hamster, you can first try letting him crawl into a container (those round Quaker Oat boxes are great) or plastic tunnel. After he goes in, you would lift the container out of the cage and let him crawl onto your hand or out onto a small enclosed area on the floor, where you can gently pet him. You may even be able to pick him up from the floor carefully. I've found that a hamster seems less scared when you gently scoop him up from the bottom on both sides with your sort-of flat, but cupped hands.
4. Another good tip: keep the first few "holding" sessions very short and then gradually keep the hamster out for longer and longer periods of time.
5. Reward your hamster after having him out for a while. You want him to feel positive about the whole experience, and what better way to do that than by giving him a wonderful treat?
6. BUT (an important but) don't wait too long to "force" your hamster to get used to being handled. They will never get used to it if you don't try. Some hamsters are pretty friendly right away; others start out very skittish and take longer to warm up to you. It all depends on their personality and history and your, hopefully gentle, approach.

7. If you are bitten, try not to "punish" or hurt your hamster. He was either frightened (most likely) or thought he was grabbing some food. Sure, a hamster bite can really hurt (and even bleed), but the poor, scared little guy really didn't mean to hurt you. Forgive him and try again later.
8. I have never met a mean, ornery hamster that was too hard to tame. Love and gentleness go a long way. I have even tamed two class pet hamsters that had bad reputations as "biters," but changed their ways with a little TLC. But if, for some reason, you find that your hamster is just impossible to tame, then take care of him kindly for the rest of his days and find ways to enjoy him without handling him.

4.11 What kind of fruits and vegetables can I feed my hamster?

Hamsters enjoy most fruits and vegetables, depending on their individual tastes. Some good choices are: dandelion greens, grass, clover, carrots, cauliflower, celery, cucumbers, lettuce, spinach, oranges, apples, grapes, pear, berries, raisins, carrots, and corn.

There are two important things to remember about giving your hamster fresh produce. First, be sure to remove any uneaten food before it spoils. Secondly, give these foods in moderation, because if a hamster eats too much at once, it could get diarrhea.

4.12 What else can I give my hamster as a treat?

My hamsters have enjoyed bread products (bread, pancakes, muffins, etc.), pasta, and rice. On rare occasions, they can have a little bit of cooked egg or cheese.

4.13 How can I play with my hamster?

You can create a "play area," using either a store-bought pen or make-shift enclosed area. Inside, you could place food treats, hiding places, tunnels, things to run around and under, etc. Or put her on the stairs and give her a chance to climb up. Let her run around an entire room, supervised of course and hamster-proofed. Another idea is to create mazes out of toilet paper tubes and/or cardboard, and then put a treat at the end. A hamster exercise ball is also a fun way to interact with your hamster.

4.14 Will my hamster escape all the time? What can we do to avoid major escapes?

It's true that, for most hamsters, the major goal in life is to escape. They will continually test the boundaries of their cage and chew on things to find or create an escape route. Most of the time when a hamster has escaped, it was because a tunnel or cage part came loose. This usually happens because of: people (bumping the cage/tunnels), the hamster (pushing or chewing), gravity (like the wheel falling off), or cage wear and tear (ring connectors for the tunnels wearing out). A few times, we actually had a very ambitious hamster chew a hole in a tunnel, but this took several days, so we were monitoring it carefully.

Right now, our current hamster, Rocky, is the most unusual little guy. He has escaped a few times, but only because a tunnel connection got loose; in fact, he seems to hate being out of his normal habitat. Whenever he escapes, we find him waiting right by his cage, hoping for someone to find him and put him home. (But to be sure, his escape makes him a bit "wild" and hard to catch anyway.) Last week, a section of his tunnels, with a wheel, fell off, probably while he was running in the wheel, but we found him in the morning sound asleep in his nest. He just likes to be home sweet home!

To reduce the likelihood of escapes, I would suggest frequently checking the cage connections and the condition of areas where the hamster might tend to bite, if any. Don't bother to buy special

biting chews or toys, because that's not what they want to bite. They prefer to chew on areas that help them plan an escape.

Ask yourself, if your hamster were to escape, what dangerous places might it get into, such as areas around other pets, heating vents/ducts, etc. Try to reduce the chance of that happening by blocking these areas in advance, as best you can.

4.14 Help! My hamster escaped! What should I do?

First, try not to panic. There are many things you can do to find your hamster and keep it safe.

1. REMOVE PREDATORS - First of all, if you have any larger pets, like a cat or dog, that could hurt your hamster, confine them or put them in a separate place for a while.
2. BLOCK DANGEROUS PLACES – Look around your house and find and block any dangerous areas that your hamster might crawl into. Remember that your hamster can squeeze into a hole about the size of a quarter (smaller for dwarf hamsters or hamster babies). Some dangerous places are heating vents/ducts, behind/under stoves and other appliances, any exit to the outside, etc. If you know for sure the hamster is or isn't in certain rooms, you can also shut doors to keep the hamster in a smaller area than the entire house/apartment.
3. SEARCH - Keep your eyes and ears open, especially in the evening hours and at night. Remember that hamsters are nocturnal, so they are more active at night. Check every nook and cranny in the house. Shake food containers, or make other noises that mean "dinnertime," or call out to your pet in the voice you normally use to speak to it. Then listen carefully for any response, even a tiny scratching noise from behind a desk or something.
4. PUT FOOD OUT – Put food treats and water around the house in several locations. I usually put out small pieces of apple and sunflower seeds. Keep checking to see if anything has been taken or eaten. Be careful, though, if you live in an area where this might attract ants or other pests.
5. CAGE ON THE FLOOR – If you have a cage with tunnels or doors you can leave open, put it on the floor near where it's usually kept or in a place you think your hamster might be. Make sure there is at least one way the hamster can crawl into the cage, such as a tunnel going down to the floor. You might be surprised in the morning to find your pet curled up in its old nest!
6. MAKE A HAMSTER TRAP - For example, you could put a small plastic garbage can (clean, of course) or bucket in a room with food inside. An aquarium would work too, as long as the hamster won't be able to climb back out after it's caught. I usually line the bottom with something soft, like a small towel, because if it works, the hamster will fall down into the trap. Then build a ramp or steps (like with small blocks) up to the garbage can so that the hamster will climb up and fall inside. If the container is deep enough (with slick, smooth sides), it won't be able to climb out. To tempt the hamster to climb the ramp or steps, put bits of its favorite food, like tiny pieces of apple or sunflower seeds, along the way. Then, put a nice amount of some great-smelling treat inside the bottom of the trap, like a nice hunk of apple. That's to tempt the hamster to go ahead and drop down for that delicious treat. Hopefully, it will do that and not be able to climb back out. Then you will find him in the morning waiting at the bottom of the trap!

Our hamster, Rocky, didn't really like to escape. If a tunnel was loose and he got out overnight, he was waiting right by his cage in the morning, a little wild and hard to catch, but ready to go home, where he knew he was safe and sound.

4.15 How long does a hamster live?

I've read that the average life span of a hamster is about 1000 days, which would be about 2 years and 9 months. The longest living hamster I had was about 2 years and 8 months old, which I figured out to be 965 days, pretty close to 1000! I know of other people who have had a hamster that lived 3 or 4 years.

5. New Pet Guinea Pig

5.1 Should I get one guinea pig or two?

I've heard that the best toy to buy for a guinea pig is another guinea pig!

Guinea pigs are very social and enjoy living together. So if you can get at least two to keep each other company, that is best. If you can only have one, though, don't despair, because you will be its friend. However, if you do have more than one, keep in mind that you must have a large enough cage for both.

I have even heard that when one guinea pig dies, the remaining one can have difficulty adjusting, sometimes refusing to eat. That's how closely bonded they can become.

One caution, however, is that while males may live in pairs, it is best not to have them in larger groups, because they could fight. Females do well in pairs or groups.

5.2 What should I feed my guinea pig?

Guinea pigs should eat Timothy Hay (50% of its diet), guinea pig pellets (25%), and fresh produce (25%). There is a misconception that alfalfa hay is good for guinea pigs. Alfalfa hay is only good for YOUNG guinea pigs. After the first six months, a grass-based hay such as Timothy hay should be used. A wonderful source of tasty, fresh green hay is Oxbow Hay Company (oxbowhay.com/). I have also been able to find it at a local PetSaver store.

Guinea pigs need Vitamin C added to their diet, either through supplements or by foods that naturally contain Vitamin C, such as oranges or sweet peppers. You can use liquid Vitamin C found in health food stores added to their water bottle or you can supplement with something like Chewable GTN-50C made by Oxbow Hay Company. Since our guinea pigs refused to try the supplement and disliked the liquid Vitamin C, we chose to give them red peppers on a daily basis to satisfy their Vitamin C requirements.

The kinds of produce that can be given to guinea pigs are: dandelion greens, grass, sweet peppers, oranges, apples, carrots, etc. Don't give guinea pigs lettuce, broccoli, or anything else that contains significant amounts of calcium, which their bodies can't process and sometimes causes kidney or bladder stones to form.

Note: The above information came from a veterinarian who specializes in cats and small critters. Apparently a lot of information in books (and on web sites) is inaccurate.

5.3 What else do I need for my guinea pig?

Your guinea pig will need a water bottle, food dish, and a place to hide or sleep. Some guinea pigs enjoy chewing on toilet paper or paper towel tubes. Our guinea pigs love hide under, chew on, and run through corrugated cardboard boxes that we make into houses/tunnels, by turning them upside down and cutting out door holes.

5.4 What kind of cage is best?

There are many kinds of guinea pig cages. The main thing to consider is size. Many of the cages sold in pet stores are too small for guinea pigs, especially if you have two or more living together.

According to CavyCages.com, you should have a minimum of 7.5 to 10.5 square feet for one or two guinea pigs. The two cages we originally purchased, for example, are about 1.3 x 2 feet, which is only 2.6 square feet each. When we linked them together with tunnels, it made a total of 5.2 square

feet, plus several feet of tunnels. That worked well for a while, until we abandoned that setup and switched to the much larger Cubes & Coroplast Cage. (See more information in questions below).

5.5 What kind of bedding should I use in the cage?

The safest type of bedding, recommended by our vet, is the kind made from recycled paper. The brand we use is called Care Fresh. Most pet stores carry it nowadays. Other bedding, such as pine and cedar, can cause respiratory problems, and in fact, one of our guinea pigs developed a wheezing problem when we used pine bedding. This wheezing disappeared after we switched to CareFresh.

I find it helpful to put newspaper underneath the bedding to absorb some of the moisture. It also makes it easier when cleaning the cage, because you can simply roll up the newspaper with the bedding.

5.6 How could i get my guinea pig used to me and tame?

To get a new pet piggy used to you, you should be very patient yet still interact with him (or her) every day. He will be very scared at first, so let him get used to his new surroundings for the first day or two. Make sure he has a good, safe hiding spot. Allow him to eat his food in their and keep his food and water nearby, so he doesn't sit in the hiding spot and starve himself out of fear. Offer him treats, but if he's too shy, gently put it near him and go back a little way to watch and see if he takes it. If you find a special treat he likes, offer it every day and patiently wait for the day he will take it from your hand. Some pigs take a short time and others take a long time to get used to you. Things to remember:

1. Do not grab your guinea pig with one hand, which is very scary and dangerous for him. Use two hands to pick him up, one under his bottom and the other under his chest and wrapped around his back.
2. Do not make sudden or loud noises near your guinea pig. Do talk softly to him and let him get used to your voice.
3. Do not chase your pig all around the cage to pick him up. Try to "corner" him gently, so he can't run away and then gently and firmly pick him up.
4. Do some research to find out what treats and foods are safe for your pig. Here are some web pages to get you started:

guinealynx.info/healthycavy.html#diet

guinealynx.info/pamphlet.pdf

guinealynx.info/guinea_pigs_are_great.pdf

5. It's nice to hold your pig in your lap with a blanket or something soft. Sometimes they like to cuddle up in there, because it's safe and warm.
6. It's very important that the guinea pigs have enough space to live and move around in. A lot of people don't realize how much space they need. Cavycages.com has a lot of good information about cage size needed for guinea pigs.
7. Do NOT use one of those exercise balls - they are not safe for guinea pigs, no matter what the package says.

5.7 What can you train a guinea pig to do?

Guinea pigs don't do a lot of tricks like dogs, but you can get them to do some fun things. Like they will start to squeal for treats when they hear the sounds that are usually made for treats, such as crinkling a bag or opening the refrigerator or opening the door to go outside and get them grass. So you can take advantage of this and get them to squeak for a certain sound if you make that sound every time you give them food. For example, I usually go outside once a day and cut them a big bowl of grass with scissors. So before I go outside I tap the scissors on the plastic bowl and they start squeaking like crazy. They know that grass is coming soon. I never trick them meanly into thinking they will get grass without really getting it, though. If I tap the bowl, they always get grass and they know that.

Another "trick" I have mine do is to get "really tall" for special treats. They stand up on their hind legs and lift their body up really high. Some pigs have done this automatically and others seem to take a while to learn it, but it's fun to hold a piece of food up and have them stand up on their back legs and beg.

I'm sure you can probably think of some other ideas like this to train your pigs.

5.8 How often does my guinea pig need to exercise?

At least once a day, guinea pigs should be given "floor time" to run around and exercise. It is great fun to watch them run laps around a room or sneak off to explore another room. Make sure that there are no electrical cords low enough for them to chew on or anything toxic on which they might curiously nibble.

When the weather is nice, guinea pigs enjoy going outside to explore or nibble grass (if you haven't put lawn chemicals on it recently). You must supervise them closely outside to make sure they don't wander off and to keep them safe from other animals in the area. For outside time, I've found it helpful to have some sort of enclosure, such as the Small Animal Playpen by Prevue, available at PetSmart.com.

5.9 How much did your cages and tunnels setup cost for your guinea pigs? (NOTE: This was the old cage setup shown in my online stories, [Jailbreak](#) and [Hermione's Great Adventure](#). The new Cubes & Coroplast style cage, shown in my Guinea Pig Gallery (kathyskritters.com/tales/pgallery/cages.html), is discussed in the next question below.)

I bought the two large cages at a local pet store for approximately \$25 each. The tunnels (called Fun-nels) are actually marketed as ferret tunnels. The tube (straight) and elbow (curved) tunnels were bought at PetSmart, both at our local store and online, for approximately \$8 apiece. I bought the tee tunnel at PetCo.com for \$13, plus shipping.

I used 7 elbow tunnels, 4 tube tunnels, and a tee tunnel. I didn't buy these all at once, but gradually. So that's about \$100 in tunnels, combined with the 2 cages, for a grand total of about \$150.

We used to let our guinea pigs use the tunnels freely between the two cages, but then they decided that the tunnels were a nice "bathroom." This made the tunnels messy all the time, and since they were very hard to snap apart to clean, this became a problem. So we revised our approach to let our pigs use the tunnels to come down to the floor for playtime, but then we blocked their access to the tunnels at all other times. Since our pigs liked to be in the same cage together, we just alternated which cage they stayed in each day, so they were evenly soiled. That way, we could clean them both on the weekends.

One advantage of that approach was that when the pigs were out for playtime on the floor, they could use the tunnels to go home whenever they were tired, hungry, or had to go to the bathroom. Of course, there were lots of places they'd rather hide, like under the couch...

5.10 What is a Cubes & Coroplast Cage and why did you switch to that?

A Cubes & Coroplast Cage is made out of those metal grids that come packaged to create connectable storage cubes and a corrugated plastic material called coroplast. I found out about it at CavyCages.com.

When the cages and tunnels setup (see previous question) proved to be a messy problem, our pigs ended up spending most of their day together in a 16" x 24" cage, which is only about 2.5 square feet of space. Even though they were given floor time at least once a day, this was not enough living space. So we built them a huge new cage, with cube grids for the sides and coroplast for the bottom. They now have 30 square feet of room to run around, including a second floor accessed by a ramp. They love to run up the ramp to their hayloft or do piggie laps around the "downstairs."

The new Cubes & Coroplast style cage is shown in my Guinea Pig Gallery (kathyskritters.com/tales/pgallery/cages.html), where detailed photos and specifications for making the cage can be found. Because of the new, larger cage, we were able to add a third guinea pig, Pippi, to our family. (You can learn more about Pippi by visiting Pippi's Pics (kathyskritters.com/tales/pgallery/pippi.html) in the Guinea Pig Gallery.)

5.11 Where did you buy the grids and coroplast to make your C&C cage?

I got the grids at Target in household goods. The coroplast, which is like corrugated cardboard, except made of plastic, was a bit harder to find.

I found coroplast at a plastics company that sells it to sign stores by looking in the yellow pages for plastic sheeting. The category in my yellow pages is "PLASTICS – RODS, TUBES, SHEETS, ETC. – SUPPLY CENTERS." You can also look under sign stores, but it may be more expensive. I actually called a sign store, who gave me the name of a supplier when I told them what I wanted it for. It comes in huge 4' x 8' sheets, and is not very bendable, so it was tricky to get in the car to get home. See if you can find a plastics supplier in the yellow pages, call them, and see if they will sell you a single sheet or two. I got two, because of the large cage I made. There are alternatives (linoleum, vinyl), but coroplast is so perfect for the job that it really is worth the trouble to get some.

There is some additional information at: cavycages.com/cubes.htm.

5.12 Do guinea pigs really sleep with their eyes open?

Yes, guinea pigs sleep with their eyes open. They can close them, but they often don't. It's like they're always on guard against "danger." Very cute!

5.13 What is the lifespan of a guinea pig?

Approximately five years, but as long as 8 to 10 years. If you decide to have a pet guinea pig, be sure that you can commit to taking care of it for that length of time.

6. Breeding Guinea Pigs

6.1 At what age can I breed my guinea pigs?

Females should be between 5 and 10 months old. If she is older than 10 months, she should not be bred for the first time, since her pelvic bones fuse at 12 months old and she would be unable to deliver her babies. A male breeding with a first-time female ideally should be between 2 and 5 months old.

6.2 How long is a guinea pig's pregnancy?

The term of pregnancy runs between 67 and 73 days.

6.3 How can I tell if my guinea pig is pregnant?

Short answer: it's not easy to tell. The long answer is excerpted from the best guinea pig guidebook I know, *The Proper Care of Guinea Pigs* by Peter Gurney:

- "There is usually a telltale sign that a successful mating has taken place. You will find what appears to be a small plug of candle wax lying on the floor of the mated pair's quarters. This is produced by the boar only after he has successfully ejaculated in the sow and is meant to seal in his sperm." p. 124
- "There are a few pointers that can signpost the progress of the pregnancy. The first sign that we are in business is the sow's increased water intake, at about two to three weeks into her term. Gradually her girth will widen, beginning lower down on her body and then slowly ballooning upwards. Some guinea pigs grow grotesquely large and even become a little splay legged in the rear, while others just get slightly rotund." p. 125-126
- "You will feel a "quickenings" (independent movement of her young) a week to ten days before she is due to deliver. Just forward of the vulva you will feel the ends of the pubic bones. Feel them early on so that you will know what to look for when she gets closer to her time. Three to four days before the birth is expected, they will begin to part. When they have separated to a distance of about half an inch, you can expect the birth to occur anytime during the next 48 hours." p. 126-127

6.4 What should I do if my guinea pig is pregnant?

I will answer this with more information from the wonderful book, *The Proper Care of Guinea Pigs* by Peter Gurney:

- "Remove the boar as soon as you are sure that the sow is pregnant. This will not only avoid upsetting her with any changes closer to her time but will also be a precaution against another pregnancy and risking her babies! A boar will never intentionally harm his young. However, if they happen to get in the way when he tries to re-mate the sow when she comes into season a few hours after she has given birth, they may get injured or killed." p. 128-129
- "During the last three weeks of her pregnancy, ensure that she gets a daily bowl of bread and milk or a fortified milk-drink of the kind given to convalescents. Continue giving this two weeks post delivery, for it will be beneficial to both mother and young." p. 128

6.5 Can I hold my pregnant guinea pig?

Yes, just be sure to support her abdomen underneath when you pick her up.

6.6 How many babies does a guinea pig have?

For her first litter, a sow (female) usually has about 2 or 3. Subsequent litters can produce as many as 6 or 8.

6.7 What is a baby guinea pig like when it's born?

Unlike hamsters, guinea pig babies are born fully developed. They look just like grown-up guinea pigs, only miniature! They have fur and teeth, and their eyes are open too. The newborn can run and eat solid food. However, they still need their mother's milk for 3 to 4 weeks.

6.8 My guinea pig just had babies. I didn't even know she was pregnant. What should I do?

The mother will do a good job of taking care of her babies. They will drink her milk and also eat her stool, which contains the vitamin B-complex that they are not yet able to produce on their own. In addition, baby guinea pigs eat hay, lettuce, dandelion, oats, and pellets, just like their mother.

I would recommend getting a good book on raising guinea pigs (see my [Recommended Books](#) section). An excellent one is *The Proper Care of Guinea Pigs* by Peter Gurney (T.F.H. Publications, Inc., 1999). Another good resource is *Guinea Pigs: A Complete Pet Owner's Manual* by by Katrin Behrend.

6.9 How can I tell the male babies from the females?

Both sexes have a y-shaped configuration in their genitalia. However, in boars (males), a small dot is visible in the center of the "y." If you press gently around this dot, you will see his male organ "pop" out.

6.10 When should I separate the males from the females?

Females are sexually mature at 4 weeks, and males at 3 to 4 weeks of age. Males should not be kept together in groups, because they would start fighting for rank.