

Chinchilla, Gerbil, Hamster, Degus, Sugar Glider, and Hedgehog Containments

Our topics for this week are:

- The behaviors and physical needs of various small mammals for different containments

Chinchillas

Chinchillas are athletic and need multilevel ramps, perches, and platforms for jumping and the largest cage practical for their containment area. Metal cages should be used. Wood or plastic cages will be gnawed through. The minimum size for cages should be 24 X 24 inches and 24 inches high for each chinchilla. Chinchillas are not very social and are usually housed alone in a cage. Pairs may be compatible, but much larger cages are necessary to reduce the tendency for aggression.

Mesh openings for wire sides should be no larger than 1 X 2 inches. Solid bottomed cages are best. If wire bottom cages used, the mesh should be no larger than 0.5 X 0.5 inches to prevent their feet from getting caught. Broken tibias from inappropriate wire flooring are common. Exercise wheels should have solid bottoms without rungs or cross bars. The diameter of the wheel should be at least 15 inches. When wire bottomed cages are used, a portion of the floor should be a solid bottomed area for rest from the wire. Chinchillas should also have access to some of their feces since they are coprophagic and will eat their feces at night. Unprinted newspaper, kiln dried pine, or aspen shavings are safe forms of substrate. Hiding places can be provided using PVC piping that is large in diameter compared to the size of chinchillas.

Chinchilla locomotion is primarily hopping. Hollow exercise balls may be dangerous since they force chinchillas to run which can dangerously exhaust them.

Chinchillas clean their fur with dust. A shallow pan with two to four inches of appropriate commercial dust (nine parts silver sand to one part Fuller's earth) should be offered for five to 10 minutes at least two to three times per week. The dust pan should not be left in the enclosure for longer periods to keep the sand clean from feces and food. Alternatively, a separate aquarium or similar enclosure may be used exclusively for five to 10 minute dust bathing every 24 to 72 hours.

Chinchillas are native to high altitudes and cold weather. They will have heat stress at temperatures above 80°F and should be kept in well ventilated enclosures at 35 to 80°F with low humidity (less than 40%) and protection from direct sunlight. They need 12 hours of darkness at night with undisturbed rest during the day.

Gerbils

Gerbils are gregarious and can be housed together, regardless of gender. They are good jumpers and the enclosure walls should be tall enough to prevent them from jumping out plus a lid for additional assurance of preventing escape. Gerbils are very active and need space to prevent behavior problems associated with overcrowding. Therefore, enclosures should provide at least 12 X 24 inches for a pair of gerbils with walls at least 12 inches high.

The container floor should be solid and smooth. Gerbils like to frequently stand on their

hind feet which could lead to injuries of their small feet or delicate tail becoming injured by wire mesh flooring. Likewise, only solid floored exercise wheels should be used for gerbils. Wheels that have spokes which might catch their tail should not be used. Glass aquariums or plastic tubs with wire mesh lids for ventilation are adequate containment structures. Five gallons of space are needed for each gerbil. Gerbils are indigenous to desert so a pan of sand should be provided for gerbils to bathe in for personal hygiene and mental stimulation.

The best temperature range is 60-90°F and relative humidity should be near 30%. Aspen shavings, sand, or paper products are adequate substrates. Container enrichments should include PVC tubing for hiding and exercise, as well as ladders, cardboard boxes, toilet paper or paper towel tubes, ramps, and rocks.

Hamsters

Adult, sexually mature, golden (Syrian) hamsters should be housed alone, except for breeding. Chinese or Russian hamsters are smaller, less solitary, and can be housed in groups of littermates. Stainless steel cages are best with deep bedding for burrowing (aspen shavings or paper products). Enclosure walls should be at least six inches above the level of the substrate. Solid bottomed cages are more secure and permit a hamster's needed coprophagic behavior. A single hamster should have a cage of at least 12 X 16 inches and 12 inches high.

Cages should be well ventilated. Wire cages are preferable. Female hamsters come into estrus every four days accompanied by a strong odor.

Recommended cage enrichments include an exercise wheel of fine mesh or solid running surface, and ramps, ladders, and tubes for climbing and hiding. Exercise wheels should be at least 5 ½ inches in diameter. A hamster exercise ball may be beneficial, but there can be risks of injuries from rolling down stairs or exhaustion.

When reassembling the enclosure after cleaning, hide boxes, chew blocks, and other items should be replaced in their original locations. Hamsters are finicky about the arrangement of their enclosure.

The temperature should be maintained between 64 and 79°F. At temperatures below 50°F, hamsters will *hibernate* (go into a prolonged dormant state) and at above 80°F, hamsters will *estivate* (a sleep-like state similar to hibernation).

Degus

Degus are gregarious, territorial, ground dwellers. They prefer to live in small groups of 5 to 10 animals of the same sex. Males should be introduced to each other prior to puberty or they are likely to fight.

Their housing needs are greater than other small mammals since groups need to be housed together and provide areas for digging, storage of food, nesting, scent marking of each other, sand baths, and low level climbing. They are larger than other rodents commonly kept as pets and can eat thick wood, plastic, and small gauge wire easily. Because they can climb and jump, they need very large cages. Minimum cage size for one pair of adults is 2 X 4 ft. and 2 ft. high. The minimum length of a cage for a group of degus is 5 ft and a height of 4 ft. No wood or plastic should be used for the frame. Non-galvanized aluminum or steel should be used as framing for either glass or acrylic sides. Cages and exercise wheels should have a solid bottom to reduce the

risk of foot damage and infection. The preferred temperature is 65-75F.

A thick substrate (four inches) should be provided using chopped straw, hay, shredded paper, or aspen shavings since degus like to burrow. Heavy food bowls and sipper bottles should be used to reduce territorial hoarding. Enrichment items can include tree branches, hollow logs, wood blocks, cardboard tubes, and large rodent all wire exercise wheels. Sand or dust baths are needed twice per week for about 30 minutes.

Sugar Gliders

Sugar gliders are very gregarious arboreal marsupials that may be tamed but are not domesticated. If housed alone, sugar gliders will develop stereotypical behaviors which can lead to self-mutilation, pacing, or cannibalism. At least four sugar gliders should be housed together. However, new sugar gliders must be gradually introduced over days to an established group.

Enclosures should be large enough, vertically and horizontally, to permit gliding with a variety of branches to glide between, and bright lighting should be avoided which can damage their vision. Horizontal cage bars will facilitate climbing. An individual space of at least 24 X 24 X 36 inches should be provided for each sugar glider. If sugar gliders are overcrowded, stereotypic behaviors of pacing, cannibalism, and self-mutilation may occur. Exercise outside of an enclosure must be closely supervised since they can reach and hide in areas that other pets cannot. Large, tall aviaries with wire mesh sides with openings of less than ½ inch are best for groups of gliders. Wire bottomed cages may be used to allow droppings to go through, but the mesh openings should be 1 X ½ inches, or less. Latches on cages must be secure. Sugar gliders are dextrous and can often open simple latches. Materials must be used for housing that resist damage from sugar glider's lower incisors, called gouging teeth, that point forward. Wood frame enclosures are not sufficient containment.

Tree branches should be added for climbing and moving exercises, but some fruit tree branches may be poisonous, such as cherry wood. Ropes, ladders, and exercise wheels are other favorite diversions. Sleeping pouches or nest boxes lined with cloth, bark, or leaves should be provided at the top of the gliding enclosure for rest and warmth. Water and feeding bowls should also be fixed in an elevated location because gliders urinate and defecate indiscriminately and will unintentionally contaminate their water and food with waste products. Bowls should be too small for sugar gliders to climb in and soil. Temperature should be maintained at 60 to 90F. The preferred range is 75 to 85F. Light exposure should be approximately 12 hours per day.

Hedgehogs

Hedgehogs prefer a solitary existence and are usually housed individually in at least 20 gallon aquariums or other smooth walled, solid floored enclosure with a thick substrate of aspen shavings, hay, or shredded paper to allow digging. They are good climbers and have little fear of heights but are susceptible to injuries from falls. Hedgehogs are nocturnal and need a hiding box to rest during the day with large floor space for exercise at night. Their hidebox should be large enough for them to easily turn around in. They prefer to use one part of a cage to eliminate. Water and feed bowls should be attached to the cage wall or too heavy to be pushed around and turned over. A litter pan of dust-free litter may be used to facilitate daily cleaning. The entire enclosure should be cleaned each week.

Hedgehogs like to use exercise wheels during their nocturnal activity. The floor of the wheel should be solid to avoid toe and leg injuries. Small enclosures can cause hedgehogs to develop stereotypic behaviors (excessive pacing and weaving). The enclosure ambient temperature should be temperate to warm (70 to 85° F). Cooler temperatures can cause hibernation, and hotter temperatures may induce estivation. Humidity should be maintained at 40-70%. A shallow pan of water for wading can also aid in maintaining desired humidity.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- **Chinchillas require regular dust baths to keep their extremely dense fur clean.**
- **Hamsters and hedgehogs are nocturnal and prefer solitary lives.**
- **Degus, sugar gliders, and gerbils are very gregarious and prefer to live in groups of 5, or more.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.