

Getting to Know Gerbils

Our topics for this week are:

- **Natural behaviors of gerbils**
- **Cautions in handling gerbils**
- **Seizures in gerbils**

Gerbils, also called “jirds,” originated from the deserts of eastern Mongolia and northeastern China. They have long haired, thin tails. Most are sand-colored with white underbellies. Gerbils were first brought to the U.S. in 1954 and are now illegal as pets in California due to environmental risks from escape into the wild. Gerbils have been used in medical research on strokes in humans.

Both genders have ventral marking gland on their abdomens that is used to mark their territory. In gerbils, the AG distance in males is a half inch and the scrotum should be apparent after about six weeks. Only females have nipples.

A male gerbil is called a buck. A female is a doe, and young gerbils are pups. A group of gerbils is a horde.

Natural Behavior of Gerbils

Gerbils are monogamous, and pairs should not be housed separately. They live best in small groups or pairs. Gerbils are not strongly nocturnal and are usually active during the day if other activities are going on. They are gentle and rarely bite, except with new cage members if introduced too rapidly to an established group. Gerbils are not as vocal as other small rodents (mice, rats, hamsters). They like to burrow in sandy soils and should be provided deep bedding with solid-bottomed cages. Having evolved in deserts, gerbils consume little water and produce small amounts of urine. They therefore do not produce strong urine odor characteristic of other rodents. Gerbils enjoy hiding and running through tunnels, and using exercise wheels, which should have fine mesh to protect their toes. They like to chew and should not have access to plastic objects, due to risk of gastrointestinal obstruction from plastic pieces. Like other desert animals, they enjoy dust baths. If stressed, gerbils will signal danger to others by thumping a hind foot. After about five weeks from giving birth, it is recommended to remove the pups from the pregnant mother because she may become aggressive toward the older pups.

Male and female gerbils have an oval-shaped ventral marking gland on their abdomen. The gland is more pronounced in post-pubertal males that use the gland to mark their territory.

Overcrowding, high humidity (more than 50% for gerbils), or other stresses in gerbils will cause porphyrin secretion in their tears. Porphyrins in tears will stain skin and hair around the nostrils and eyes a reddish-brown and irritate the skin progressing to skin sores.

Approaching and Catching

Gerbils are semi-nocturnal desert animals that are easy to handle. If given time to adjust to the handler's smell and voice, they may climb into his cupped hands, if a handler's movements are appropriately slow. Otherwise, they may be captured with both hands or grasped in one hand using the methods used for mice, i.e., carefully grasping the base of tail or scruffing the neck and shoulder skin. Do NOT capture gerbils by their tail, except carefully at its base. The skin will easily be stripped off during its struggling, an injury called "tail slip."

Handling for Routine Care and Management

Gerbils become stressed from handling and many will seizure if the stress is prolonged. If firm manual restraint is necessary, a handler should grasp the body over the back with its head between the thumb and index finger or alternatively grasp (scruff) the skin on the neck and back and trap the tail with his little finger as done when restraining mice.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

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

- 1. Gerbils need deep bedding to burrow in for mental enrichment.**
- 2. Tail restraint of gerbils can often result in degloving injury to their tail.**
- 3. Reddish-brown tears in gerbils suggest environmental stresses.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 300 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.