

Handling New Gerbils

An owner seeks advice on how to handle new gerbils and earn their trust.

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Q: I adopted a pair of gerbils on Saturday. I would like to know the best way to hand tame them or to earn their trust.

A: Gerbils see your arms and hands as climbing structures (and your face more as another gerbil). So, the most important thing when handling gerbils is to be very still and steady. You don't want them to see you as a shaky ladder or a rickety bridge. It is easier to tame gerbils if they are living in a 10- to 20- gallon tank, rather than a housing structure with lots of tubes and hiding spaces because of available space.

Remove everything from the tank, except for food, water bottle, litter/bedding and gerbils. Wash hands with hand sanitizer and wear long sleeves to provide better traction. Then, rest your arm and hand in a gentle slope in the tank and be very still. Gerbils are curious animals and you are now the most interesting thing in the tank. Soon they should start exploring your hand and climbing up your arm to sit on your shoulder and visit with your face.

If your gerbils are very jumpy, afraid or shy, you may have to spend a week, at first, peering into the tank and talking to them softly, leaving a gift (for example, a pumpkin or sunflower seed or an inch or two of paper towel roll to gnaw). Do this several times a day until they get used to your sound and smell and associate you with good things. For nervous gerbils it is especially important that you are calm, quiet, confident and steady in handling them.