

## What Is Normal Hamster Behavior?

**Is it normal behavior for a hamster if it sneezes when a window is open or blocks the entrance to its den while sleeping?**

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**Q:** My son has a Syrian Teddy Bear hamster we moved to our room because his previous lodgings (in my son's room) are being painted. The window in my son's room is open, but the other household windows are shut. This morning the little guy (Cucumber) sneezed once. Should I be concerned?

Another thing that I have noticed is that although he is a very social hamster, while napping he clogs his hideaway hole with pretty much any object available to him in his cage. He did this before we started the painting project. Is this normal hamster behavior?

**A:** Syrian hamsters (Cucumber's variety is simply known as a Longhaired Syrian) are very susceptible to sudden temperature drops due to drafts. This lowers their immunity, and they can indeed pick up common colds from us. That's why it's always a good idea to wash your hands before handling Cucumber and avoid contact if you have a cold. At the same time, a single occasional sneeze is not at all unusual.

The good news is that if your hamster caught a cold, he will likely get over it within a day or two, assuming he's otherwise healthy. If sneezing, watery or closed eyes, a rust-colored secretion around the nose, or coughing seem to be an ongoing problem, it could be a respiratory infection or allergy. The former can be treated with antibiotics by a veterinarian; the latter can be corrected by you, once you find out what's causing the problem.

Be sure you're using appropriate bedding in your hamster's cage; CareFresh or aspen shavings are two popular, safe options. Stay away from cedar or anything with a strong fragrance.

Your instincts were correct in moving Cucumber away from the paint fumes. Hamsters, like most rodents, possess an amazing sense of smell, but it comes at the price of a very sensitive respiratory system. Even the relatively benign fumes of acrylic paints might give a hamster a difficult time.

It's absolutely normal for a hamster to block the entrance to its hideaway hole when it sleeps. Cucumber probably isn't reacting to anything in your home so much as he's exercising the instincts that would protect him from temperature extremes and predators in his native environment. He nests for security as much as for comfort. Aside from weekly cage cleanings, it's best not to disturb his nest unless it becomes damp or soiled.

It may be a bit chilly where your hamster is situated, so you might consider isolating the cage, especially when he sleeps. You also might consider more open "furniture" for him. The "hideaway hole" may be hard to clean, and you want to make sure that his sleeping conditions are clean, again, to safeguard his sensitive respiratory system. A clean milk carton with a large "door" cut into one side can be a wonderful option. The bottom of a shoe box can work nicely, too.

Your hamster would probably enjoy having torn-up sheets of plain, unscented toilet paper he can add to his nest. Save a little each time you clean his cage so you can put something familiar into his "new" home. Please don't give him any fabric or cottony "fluffy bedding," though, as these materials could pose a hazard for hamsters.

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