

Hamster Cheek Pouch Care

Learn how to keep your hamster's cheek pouches healthy.

By Audrey Pavia

Posted: March 31, 2008, 5 a.m. EDT

A hamster's best-known feature may well be its bulging cheeks. Indeed, the hamster's name is said to come from the German word "hamstern," meaning "to hoard." Hamsters stuff their cheeks with food for snacking later on or with nesting material, carrying it from one place to another. Because the cheek pouches don't contain salivary glands, food tucked into them stays fresh and dry. The rough texture of the skin lining the cheek pouches helps hold food in place so it doesn't fall out of the hamster's mouth.

The cheek pouches can develop abscesses — pockets of infection in the skin — if the cheek lining is scratched by something the hamster chews on or eats. This can also occur if food or an object becomes tightly wedged in the cheek pouch or if a tooth becomes overgrown. Suspect an abscess or impacted cheek pouch if the hamster always looks as if its cheeks are stuffed with food. An abscessed or impacted cheek pouch must be drained and flushed, and the infection treated with an appropriate antibiotic.

A hamster's cheek pouch can also turn inside out. This is the case if a pink, moist mass is hanging out of the side of the hamster's mouth. An everted pouch, as this condition is known, must be surgically repaired by a veterinarian, who will put it back into place and suture it so it stays in position.

To prevent cheek pouch problems, check your hamster's teeth regularly to ensure that they're being properly worn down through chewing. Provide safe chewing materials such as untreated wood blocks or pesticide-free branches from hardwood trees such as aspen and oak. Avoid cages or other objects with sharp edges that could damage a hamster's cheek pouch if it chewed on them.