

Ideal Hamster Cages

Know your options when choosing a cage for a hamster.

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When choosing a hamster cage, you have several options. Hamsters can live in a wire cage, an aquarium or a plastic cage with built-in tunnels and hideaways. Each has pros and cons, but security concerns are universal. Wire and plastic cages should have doors that latch securely, but metal clips to hold them closed are a good precaution. An aquarium needs a mesh wire top that fastens securely to prevent the hamster from escaping.

In all cases, cleanliness is important to hamster health, so choose a cage that will be easy to clean. You may also want to consider acquiring a smaller secondary cage such as a hamster travel cage to hold the animal while its primary home is being cleaned.

Wire cages should have horizontal bars with no more than a half-inch of space between them. Horizontal bars allow the hamster to climb the sides, which is good exercise. Look for one with a solid plastic bottom. A grate can be difficult to clean. A wire cage is a good choice for a Syrian hamster.

Hamsters can also live in 10-gallon or larger aquariums. An aquarium gives a hamster a good view of the world around it, but it doesn't offer as much air circulation or ventilation as a wire cage. An aquarium should be outfitted with ladders or other objects the hamster can climb because it won't be able to climb the smooth walls. Chinese and dwarf hamsters are well suited to living in aquariums.

Plastic hamster homes are colorful and come with built-in tubes and hidey-holes. The tunnels, tubes and other areas are just the right size for dwarf hamsters, but Syrian hamsters can grow too large for them and get stuck inside them. It's also essential to clean them regularly because ammonia from urine can build up in them, causing respiratory problems. This can also be a concern with aquariums. The built-in features can make this type of cage more difficult to clean. Avoid choosing a plastic cage with edges or ridges that the hamster could chew through.

Whichever style you choose, size is critical. Any hamster needs a cage that is at least 12 inches wide by 12 inches high by 18 inches long. Bigger is better, however, especially in the case of the Syrian hamster, which can grow to be 6 inches long. Because hamsters are so active, the more room they have to play and climb, the better exercise they'll get. If you're housing two hamsters, purchase a proportionately larger cage so they'll each have their own space.

To accessorize the cage, you'll need at least one hanging water bottle and a shallow ceramic food bowl that the hamster won't be able to tip over. Ladders and ramps give the hamster something to climb. It also needs a solid-floored exercise wheel, toys, objects it can chew and a few hiding or napping places.

Consider safety, ease of viewing and access, and the hamster's comfort when deciding where to place the cage. A hamster cage should be out of reach of curious cats or dogs. It should be at a level where it's easy to enjoy watching the hamster as well as to remove it for playtime or care. Consider placing it on a sturdy shelf or table.

With the hamster's nocturnal nature in mind, the cage should be located in a quiet area that's out of direct sunlight. Place wire cages in draft-free areas so the hamster doesn't get cold. Aquariums can heat up in the sun, so they're not a good choice for sunny areas.

The bedroom may or may not be a good spot for a hamster cage. A hamster running on a wheel may keep some people awake at night, especially if the wheel is squeaky. If possible, choose an area that's convenient for cleaning the cage and that has storage for hamster supplies like food, treats and toys.