

Choosing A Pet Hamster

Read this when considering a hamster for a pet.

By Audrey Pavia

Hamsters are best known as starter pets for children, but they may be better suited to night owls or people who enjoy observing their entertaining behavior after a long day at work. Nocturnal by nature, hamsters awaken at sunset and are active throughout the night. They can be nippy if awakened or handled during the day when they're trying to sleep. Most are solitary or are compatible with only one other hamster of the same sex, to which they've been introduced at an early age.

Species

Hamsters range in size from the 6- to 7-inch Syrian hamsters to the 2-inch Roborovski hamsters. For a child who's at least 6 years old, the best choice is the sturdy Syrian, which has an agreeable temperament and is willing to be handled during the times it's awake. Because of their speed and small size, both of which predispose them to being escape artists, the Chinese and the various dwarf hamsters should be kept only by adults or responsible children who are at least 12 years old.

Interact With The Hamster

When choosing a hamster, ask to handle it before making your purchase. A tame hamster will allow you to pick it up and stroke it gently. It should seem interested in its surroundings rather than anxious. Shop for hamsters in the evening when they're more likely to be up and around.

Handling a hamster is also an opportunity to examine its physical condition. A healthy hamster has bright eyes and a firm body. Walk away from a hamster that's thin, has a runny nose or eyes, or that has a wet rear end. Any hamster that's sharing a cage with one that appears unhealthy should be avoided as well.

Ask if the store or breeder can provide you with references to other customers. Contact them to see if they're happy with the hamster they purchased and whether they've experienced any problems.