

Gerbil factfile

There are many species of gerbils, though the Mongolian gerbil (*Meriones unguiculatus*) is the species of gerbil most commonly kept as a pet (1). Their scientific name translates as 'little clawed warrior' and they are also referred to as 'jirds'. They belong to the family of the Cricetidae (burrowing rodents) and are naturally adapted to desert environments in Africa, India and Asia (2). Their burrowing behaviour makes them fascinating to watch and they are very agile, though they can't climb well due to fur covering the soles of their feet.

Knowing more about the biology and behaviour of gerbils can help you to understand them, so here are our top ten gerbil facts!

1. Gerbils live in burrows.

- In the wild, gerbil burrows contain tunnels and food and nest chambers.
- These burrows can also be as deep underground as 170cm and may extend horizontally over six to eight metres (3).

2. Gerbils are hoarders

- Although gerbils do not have cheek pouches like hamsters, they exhibit hoarding behaviour.
- In the wild, two to three food stores have been found of 30-75cm in length and 15-20cm in height as part of their burrowing network (4).

3. Gerbils have long legs!

- Gerbils have relatively long hindlegs in comparison to their forelegs.
- They use their hindlegs extensively during digging and to perform rapid foot-thumping to raise alarm. Male gerbils also foot-thump after mating! (5)

4. Gerbils are active

- Gerbils keep themselves busy by digging and they also like to gnaw.
- They shred material to use in nesting which also helps to keep their teeth short (as they never stop growing).
- In the wild, a gerbil will gnaw off all of the needles of a pine tree before shredding the branch itself.

5. Gerbils are intelligent

- Gerbils learn a lot from their parents. For example, favoured foods are learnt from their mothers or from other familiar or related family members (6).

6. Gerbils use a range of methods to communicate.

- As well as sensitive hearing, gerbils also have an excellent sense of smell.
- They scent-mark their territory using a gland on their abdomen.
- Females also scent-mark their pups which is thought to help them recognise their offspring (7).

7. Gerbils are sociable

- In the wild, gerbils live in extended families of one breeding pair and its offspring of several generations.
- Group sizes can be between two and 17 animals!
- Usually, only the dominant pair reproduces. Offspring then help at the nest, learning essential parenting skills themselves.

8. Gerbils need their fathers

- The males help raise the young by collecting nesting material, helping to build the nest, and to clean the pups.
- This ensures the pups are always supervised and increases pup activity. Pups with their fathers present also open their eyes earlier (8).

9. Gerbils do not excrete a lot

- Because they are naturally adapted to dry climates, gerbils excrete relatively small amounts of urine to retain body fluid in the wild.

10. Gerbils are colourful

- Gerbils have a wide variety of coat colours, including black, spotted and the more common agouti colouring.
- There are behavioural and physical differences between the black and agouti. For example, black gerbils scent mark more than agouti gerbils, believed to be due to hormonal and neural differences (9).
- Females may also prefer males of their own fur colour (10).