

## Hamster factfile

Hamsters belong to the family *Cricetidae* and there are 24 different species that inhabit a variety of habitats and locations. Among the most popular kept as pets are the Syrian, the Russian dwarf Campbell and the Roborovski.

Knowing more about the biology and behaviour of hamsters can help you to understand your pet better, so check out our top ten hamster facts!

### 1. Hamsters enjoy exploring

- Hamsters use their whiskers ,or vibrissae, to aid detection of objects to explore their environment.
- Hamster whiskers vibrate backwards and forwards at rates of up to 30 whisks per second during many different behaviours.
- These movements are known as "whisking", and enable the hamster to gather information about objects in its vicinity [1].

### 2. Hamsters like to dig

- Syrian hamsters are terrestrial, burrow-digging rodents. Their natural habitat is dry, rocky plains or lightly-vegetated slopes and they build nests within their burrows.
- Some species have well-developed ear flaps that prevent soil entering the ear during digging [2].

### 3. Hamsters hoard their food

- The word 'hamster' comes from the German word *hamstern*, which means 'to hoard'.
- The Syrian hamster can hoard in its cheek pouches up to half its body weight in food and collects it to store in its nest, as a survival strategy in the wild.

### 4. A hamster's teeth never stop growing!

- All rodents have teeth that are specialised for gnawing and this gives them their name from the Latin, *rodere*, ('to gnaw') and *dentis*, meaning 'tooth'.
- Their incisors never stop growing and they have a 'self-sharpening' system where the incisors grind against each other while gnawing, which wears the teeth down [3].

### 5. Hamsters are prey animals

- As prey animals, hamsters are generally nervous of new sights, sounds and smells and return to their burrow if they're feeling afraid.
- Most wild hamsters have a complete covering of brown or grey coloured fur, in which the coat might show light or dark bands for camouflage.

## 6. Hamsters have well-developed senses

- As well as touch being important, hamsters have a well-developed sense of smell and hearing which helps in detecting predators [4].
- Hamsters looking for a mate, or pups that have fallen out of the nest, may emit ultrasonic calls. Smell is also really important for social communication [5].

## 7. Hamsters are nocturnal

- Hamsters have large eyes and a retina dominated by rods- the part of the eye that can function in less intense light.
- Hamsters are also capable of UV vision [6], which is thought to be involved in social communication and improved twilight vision in other rodents (although this trait is little understood in the hamster).

## 8. Hamsters are intelligent

- Hamsters are intelligent and learn quickly; they can be trained to come when food is presented or to perform simple tricks.

## 9. Not all hamsters are sociable

- In the wild, Syrian hamster adults generally inhabit lone burrows. Other species, such as the Russian dwarf, naturally live in groups.
- When hamsters first meet, they immediately start to establish a hierarchy, in which one animal becomes dominant over the others and can become very aggressive [7].

## 10. Hamsters can catch colds

- Hamsters are highly susceptible to strains of the human cold virus.
- Humans can infect hamsters and *vice versa*.