

Feeding your pet hamster

Hamsters are 'omnivores', this means that they eat both vegetarian food (fresh fruit and vegetables, and dry seeds) and also animal protein (usually insects). Unfortunately, most hamster mixes are entirely vegetable matter, without any animal protein; many of these mixes are also very low in some vitamins and substances called 'essential fatty acids' that are especially important for a healthy skin and coat.

What should I feed my hamster?

You can use a general hamster mix, but choose a really good one and supplement it by adding lots of healthy bits and pieces. If something's good and healthy for you, it will be just as healthy for your hamster. You can feed lots of different fruits and vegetables, use whatever you have available at home each day. You can also feed small pieces of stale bread or toast. Why not try some left over pasta, rice or potato, bits of meat, cheese or chopped boiled egg? You can also feed your hamster live insects, but this is not always possible. Hamsters also like sweet things, so you could see if your hamster likes a spoonful of fruit yoghurt. Some things he will like, but others he won't, it will be a case of trial and error.

Where can I get live insects from?

If you want to give your hamster live insects, you will need to find a pet shop that specialises in reptile feeds. Lots of small lizards have to be fed on live insects, and things like mealworms and crickets are bred for this purpose. If you get insects from a shop, you can be sure they've had no contact with insecticides or other harmful chemicals. Crickets are better than mealworms for two reasons:

- Mealworms just sit there, but the hamster gets exercise chasing the more active crickets.
- Mealworms are very, very low in calcium, which is essential for good bone strength - if hamsters eat too many mealworms, it can upset their calcium balance.

Do I have to feed live insects?

No, you don't! Feeding live insects is probably only possible if you keep your hamster in a big aquarium tank. If you don't feed live insects, try cheese, meat, egg or yoghurt.

How do I choose the best food?

The best hamster mixes are those that contain animal protein. These are sold in sealed packs, with a sell by date on them, this ensures the food is fresh and you can also check the vitamin content on the packet. When buying this type of hamster food, be sure to buy small quantities, this will ensure the food is always fresh. Once you have opened a new packet, store it in an airtight, insect-proof container. Even on the best hamster mix, your pet will benefit from some fresh food too.

Hamsters can never be given 'too much' fruit or vegetables, however, be aware that if your hamster stores his food, any fresh food will go mouldy, so make sure you clean his home out daily to avoid this from happening.

It has been purported that meat and even onions can makes hamsters savage - this is of course untrue. However, no hamster likes having his favourite food being taken away, just like a dog with a juicy bone!

If you need any other information on health issues concerning your pet, please contact Briarhill Veterinary Clinic on 091 38 00 00 and we will be happy to advise you.