

Michael Bellingham, chief executive of the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association, looks at the feeding requirements of smaller companion animals

Both hamsters and guinea pigs are popular pets. They can make excellent companions, being fun and affectionate.

Hamsters

Hamsters are adventurous and energetic. There are over 20 breeds but the most common pets are Syrian (golden) hamsters and dwarf breeds. If well cared for, they will live for around two years.

Hamsters are omnivores and love to hoard food. Wild hamsters gather and store grains and other food in burrows to ensure a constant source of food. Hamsters are adapted to running and digging and are active primarily during twilight and during the night. The best feeding time is in the evening when they start to wake up.

Commercial pet foods specifically for hamsters are available and here are some nutrition tips to implement:

- In their natural habitat hamsters eat grasses, seeds,

grain and sometimes insects. Although they are often mistaken as herbivores, they are omnivores and need protein in their diet to keep them healthy.

- Feed hamsters every day.
- A heavy, earthenware bowl is best to keep the food dry – it will need to be cleaned daily.
- Hamsters have delicate cheek pouches. Do not give foods that contain whole oats as these can puncture pouches. Also avoid sticky foods, as these stick to their pouches.
- Other foods not to feed include apple seeds and skin, grape seeds, almonds, garlic, onions, aubergine and chocolate (or any other sugary sweet).
- Hamsters have teeth which grow continually. If not fed a suitable diet, the teeth fail to wear sufficiently which can lead to painful dental conditions. Plenty of hay and safe twigs such as apple, hazel or willow to chew are a good idea. Gnawing blocks are also available.
- Hamsters will enjoy a small piece of fruit or vegetable. Be

mindful that too much green food can cause diarrhoea. Don't feed too many treats as hamsters can become overweight.

- Fresh, clean water must be always available. There are drinking bottles designed for hamsters on the market. Change the water daily to ensure the bottle is clean. Check that your hamster can reach and drink from the bottle with ease.

Guinea pigs

Guinea pigs are sociable, inquisitive and affectionate but their personality and behaviour differs from breed to breed. They are often considered a good first pet for children, but it should always be an adult that takes responsibility to ensure they are cared for properly. With gentle handling and lots of stimulation, a guinea pig can live for five to six years but some live longer.

Guinea pigs are herbivores and naturally eat a diet of grasses, plants, vegetables and crops. Commercial pet foods for guinea pigs are available and here are the most important nutritional factors to consider:

- Guinea pigs have teeth which grow continually. If not fed a suitable diet, the teeth fail to wear sufficiently, leading to painful dental conditions. Plenty of hay and grass in their diet is vital to help ensure their teeth are sufficiently worn down.
- Guinea pigs require moderately high levels of fibre. Feeding good quality fresh hay will help address this. Hay intake should be encouraged by allowing free-choice selection of hay at all times. Grazing on



hay and grass also promotes natural behaviour, important for enrichment and wellbeing.

- Like humans but unlike rabbits, guinea pigs are unable to make their own vitamin C and it must be provided as part of their diet. Fresh grass or leafy greens are excellent vitamin C sources and can be given daily.

• Guinea pigs have a high vitamin A requirement, much higher than that of rabbits or other rodents. Too high levels of calcium can lead to urinary tract problems for guinea pigs. To ensure the right nutrients are provided in the right proportions, there are commercially prepared guinea pig diets available.

- Occasional treats can be given, e.g. small amounts of apple and strawberry. However, they suffer from obesity if food is not monitored.

• Keep an eye on a guinea pig's weight with the Guinea Pig Size-O-Meter: www.pfma.org.uk/guinea-pig-size-o-meter.

- There are a number of foods that are poisonous to guinea pigs. Do not feed them potato, rhubarb, tomato leaves, buttercups, daffodils, poppies or tulips. The list is not exhaustive, and if in doubt it is best to avoid.

• Fresh, clean water must be always available, and the bottle cleaned frequently. There are drinking bottles designed for guinea pigs on the market and make sure the guinea pig can reach it with ease.

For a list of hamster and guinea pig food manufacturers, visit: www.pfma.org.uk/pfma-members-producing-small-animal-food/

Feeding hamsters and guinea pigs



“Hamsters are omnivores and need protein in their diet to keep them healthy”