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35¢

# POCKET PETS



**4-H-YOUTH PROGRAMS**  
**COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE**  
**COLLEGE OF VETERINARY MEDICINE**  
**MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

This manual is a reprint, with minor changes, from an Ohio State University Cooperative Extension Service manual on this subject. We are indebted to Ohio State University for granting permission to reprint this material.

Michigan 4-H - Youth educational programs and all other Cooperative Extension programs are available to all without regard to race, color, or national origin. ● Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Gordon E. Guyer, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.

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## POCKET PETS

### Gerbils

Gerbils can be fascinating friends. They are very quick and have great curiosity. They love digging and exploring. You will need to keep the cage clean and provide fresh food and water daily. For such a small amount of work, you can have a healthy, active companion.

#### 4-H

4-H projects are designed for youth groups by members of the Cooperative Extension Service. Information concerning projects is available to your group from your county Extension Service office.

The 4-H Pledge is:

I pledge:  
My HEAD to clearer thinking,  
My HEART to greater loyalty,  
My HANDS to larger service, and  
My HEALTH to better living, for  
My club, my community,  
my country, and my world.

#### Project Requirements

The purpose of the 4-H Pocket Pet project is to give you an opportunity to learn about and care for an animal. It will be your responsibility to feed, water, clean, and play with your pet.

To learn how to care for your gerbil, it is important to read this book. To answer the questions in this book, you will need to read it thoroughly and talk with your fellow members, your group leader, and any local resource people available.

As a 4-H member, you will want to try to attend all of the meetings of your group; and you will want to take an interest and help plan activities for the group.

#### Questions

What is the name of your 4-H group? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is your 4-H leader? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is your Extension 4-H - Youth agent? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you met your Extension 4-H - Youth agent? \_\_\_\_\_

Where is the 4-H office located? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you know the 4-H Pledge? \_\_\_\_\_

## Word List:

1. Diurnal
2. Shred
3. Eliminates
4. Monogamous

The Mongolian gerbil, a member of the rodent family, was introduced to the United States in the early 1950's for medical research. Until recently, many people had never heard of these animals, but today they are fast becoming one of the most popular Pocket Pets and are used in many laboratories for research. Gerbils came from the deserts and sandy wastes of Asia and Africa. Since most of the water that gerbils need comes from the food they eat, at times they can go for months without drinking. Most rodents sleep during the day; gerbils, however, are diurnal, meaning they sleep at night and are awake during the day.

The Mongolian gerbil is a rodent whose scientific name is *Mereones unguiculatus*. Like other rodents, it has incisors (front, cutting teeth) which never stop growing. It is also a mammal, which means that the mother feeds her young with milk from her own body and is covered with hair.

An adult gerbil is about four inches long, with its tail adding another four inches. Gerbils weigh about three ounces. The fur on their backs is dark brown, changing to a very light brown on the sides. Their light gray undersides often look almost white. They have soft noses with black and white whiskers. Their tails are long and furred. When young, they have little clumps of fur on the ends of their tails. Gerbils have short front legs and long hind legs that are strong and well developed. Although their hind-leg muscles allow them to take leaps of 24 inches, most of the time gerbils run about on all fours. Each foot has five toes with relatively large black nails. The toes of the forepaws are so skillful that they can pick up small seeds. These small animals often take a sitting position when they eat and hold their food in their front paws very much like a squirrel does.



*This gerbil is eating. Notice the sitting position and that the food is held in the front paws.*

Questions

Gerbils are rodents? True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_

What is the scientific name for gerbils? \_\_\_\_\_

Where did gerbils originally come from? \_\_\_\_\_

How are gerbils different from other rodents? \_\_\_\_\_

Selecting Your Gerbil

Look for a playful animal with bright eyes, perky ears, and a slick hair coat. Gerbils like company, so it's best to get at least two gerbils. If you don't plan on breeding gerbils, get two females because males are more aggressive and would probably fight.

If you do plan to breed gerbils, have your male and female caged together by the time they are eight weeks old. If you wait until they are 12 weeks or older, they will live together happily but will probably never breed!

Did you take a picture of your pet(s)? \_\_\_\_\_

If so, place it here.

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Name \_\_\_\_\_

Did you choose a male or a female? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

Describe your pet(s): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Housing

An aquarium (three- to 15-gallon size) makes a most interesting home. Sometimes leaky aquariums can be purchased for a modest cost and used as a cage. Metal or heavy wooden cages may also be used. Keep the cage covered with a lid made of metal or hardware cloth. You may prefer to buy a regular small metal animal cage from your local pet shop. If your pet scatters its litter, set the cage in a large cardboard box with sides about five inches high. If you make your own cage, plan on making it with two floors with steps or a ladder leading to the second floor, so your pet can run up and down stairs, through holes, and do other stunts for exercise and fun.

Litter of any clean and absorbent material should be used. Cedar chips, sawdust, and commercial small animal litter are best. One inch of litter should



*Gerbils enjoy digging. This gerbil is busy rearranging litter. Your gerbil will spend hours each day on this activity.*

be enough, but don't be surprised if your gerbil rearranges the material for its nest. Try placing a piece of burlap in the cage for gerbils to chew up and nest in. They will shred almost any kind of paper or cardboard and use it to line their nests. Even though gerbils are fairly odorless, the cage must be cleaned several times a month.

Often your pet will use one corner of its house for a bathroom. So clean this area every couple of days. A small amount of additional litter should be added weekly. It is important to keep the cage dry. Gerbils enjoy temperatures between 65 to 80° F. Try not to expose them to very cold temperatures, and be particularly careful of drafts.

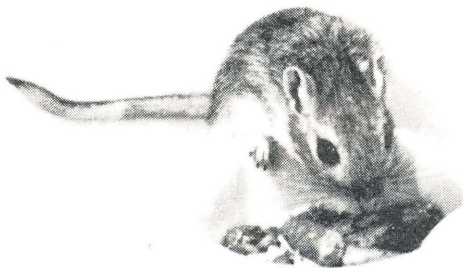
Describe your cage: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Feeding

Gerbils live on grains, seeds, roots, and grasses. Sunflower seeds, corn, oats, wheat, watermelon seeds, bits of apple, and lettuce are also popular foods. Fresh grass is an enjoyable treat. Your gerbil will eat the same kind of food that is eaten by mice, hamsters, or guinea pigs. Experiment to see what your gerbil likes best. Tastes may vary! Each gerbil will eat about one tablespoon of food a day. Gerbils won't overeat, but overfeeding is wasteful. Feed only once a day. If extra food is found when cleaning the cage, you are overfeeding.

Water should be provided in a gravity bottle dispenser, since a watering dish is easily upset, and it is important to keep the cage dry. Don't be surprised if your gerbil drinks very little.

What do you feed your pet(s)? \_\_\_\_\_



*A heavy-bottomed plastic dish is useful for serving your gerbil's food.*

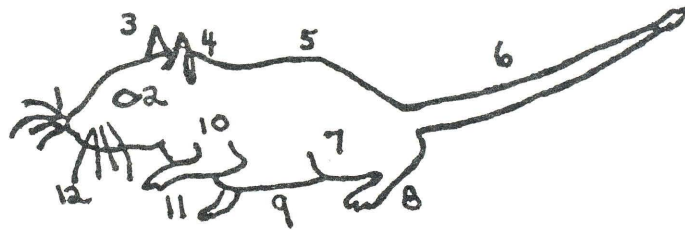
## Handling

Gerbils are shy animals with a strong curiosity. Handling your gerbils often and gently will make them relaxed friends. They enjoy having their backs and ears gently scratched. Pick up your gerbil by grasping its tail close to the body; this provides a sure hold on the animal and eliminates accidental falls. Hold the gerbil gently but firmly with your hand around its entire body. A gerbil will often jump right into your cupped hands.

How often do you handle your pet(s)? \_\_\_\_\_



## PARTS OF A GERBIL



- |                 |              |              |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1. Nostril      | 5. Back      | 9. Belly     |
| 2. Eye          | 6. Tail      | 10. Shoulder |
| 3. Ear          | 7. Thigh     | 11. Forepaws |
| 4. Nape of neck | 8. Hind foot | 12. Whiskers |

### Breeding

One of the unique characteristics of gerbils is that they are monogamous. This means they desire only one mate. If a mate dies, it might even be difficult to replace. New mates should be separated by a wire partition until they become accustomed to each other's smell.

The gestation period for gerbils is 24 to 25 days, and litters average five babies. The babies are born without hair, and the eyes stay closed for about three weeks. Both parents may stay with the litter. About this age (three weeks), they begin to take some solid food, and by the sixth week, the mother will wean them.



*These two gerbils are a healthy mating pair. They show the typical gerbil alertness.*

Privacy is important for the mother and babies during the first weeks. Do not touch the babies until their eyes are open, as the mother is very protective. If frightened, especially during the first week, she may even kill or eat her young. At three months of age, gerbils are mature and ready to breed.

Did you raise a litter? \_\_\_\_\_

How many babies were in the litter? \_\_\_\_\_

How old were they when you first saw them? \_\_\_\_\_

Describe the babies: \_\_\_\_\_

What did you do with the babies? \_\_\_\_\_



*Gerbils are desert animals and don't need a lot of water, but it is important to supply your pets with fresh water daily to be safe.*

### Health Care

Gerbils are quite free of diseases, but care should be taken to provide a dry cage, balanced diet, and protection from extremely cold temperatures. Also, if your gerbils are in direct sunlight, provide them with shade. Harder dry foods are important for proper digestion. Keep a block of wood in the cage on which your gerbil can gnaw. This is very important, as this helps to wear the teeth down; otherwise, the teeth may grow too long and hinder chewing. Skin problems are often related to dirty cages or poor nutrition. Your gerbil will spend many hours on cleaning and grooming.

To keep your pet in good health, follow these rules:

1. Keep pets clean and dry.
2. Immediately isolate any pet that looks or acts sick.
3. If your gerbil has lice or fleas, dust it with an insecticide powder recommended for cats and disinfect the cage. *Never* use insecticide powder that is recommended for dogs.

With reasonable precautions, these little pets should stay healthy and live to be three or four years old.

Did you have any disease problems this year? \_\_\_\_\_

If so, what were they? \_\_\_\_\_

How often do you clean and disinfect your pet's cage and equipment? \_\_\_\_\_

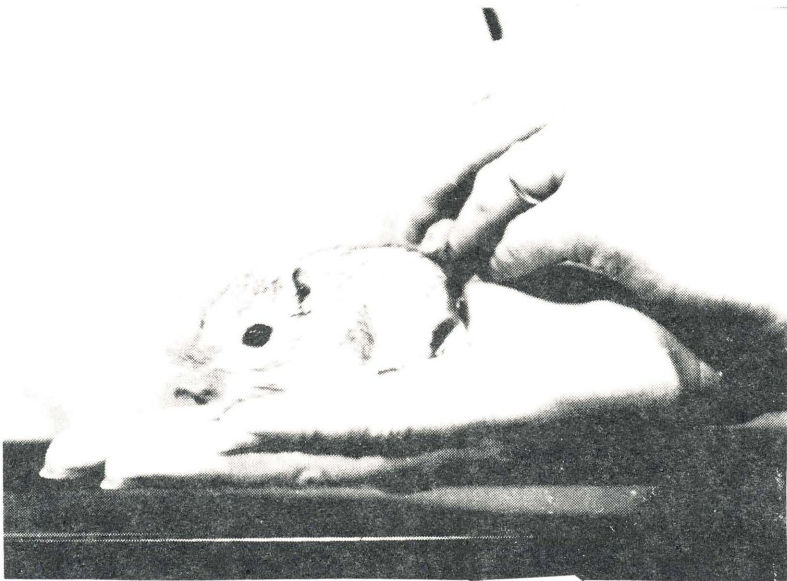
#### Caution

In the wild, gerbils can cause heavy damage to crops. Because of this, the U. S. Department of Agriculture has issued the following warning:

Because gerbils might escape, multiply rapidly, and destroy many valuable crops in the desert regions of the West, they should not be taken as pets to western Texas, Arizona, or New Mexico. California has a law making it illegal to take gerbils in that state as pets.



*These gerbils appear to be taking turns at the food dish.*



*Capture your gerbil by grasping the tail close to the body.*

*Then hold your gerbil gently but firmly with your hand around its body.*



*Let your gerbil explore you, but keep hold of the base of the tail to prevent escapes.*

HOW MUCH DOES YOUR PET COST YOU?

Expenses

1. Cost of pet		_____
2. Cost of cage or building materials		_____
3. Cost of feed:		
	<u>Kind of Food</u>	<u>Date Purchased</u>
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
4. Cost of reference books:		
	<u>Title</u>	
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
5. Other expenses (toys, bedding, medicine, etc.):		
	<u>Item</u>	
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
		<u>Total Expenses</u>
		=====

Income

1. Sales of animals:			
	<u>Number Sold</u>	<u>Date Sold</u>	<u>Amount Received</u>
	_____	_____	_____
	_____	_____	_____
	_____	_____	_____
		<u>Total Income</u>	=====

Difference between total expenses and total income \_\_\_\_\_

MY PET

(Write a short story about your pet)