

How Hamsters Became Pets: A Brief History



Hamsters, those adorable and furry little creatures, have a long and fascinating history as pets. Originating from the arid regions of Syria, Turkey, and surrounding areas, these small rodents were initially not kept as pets but rather as valuable subjects of scientific study.

The earliest documented record of hamsters as pets dates back to the 1930s when a zoologist named Israel Aharoni captured a mother and her litter in the Syrian desert. He brought them back to Jerusalem for further study, where the mother eventually gave birth to more offspring. From there, the hamsters were distributed to laboratories around the world for research purposes.

However, it wasn't until the late 1940s that hamsters began to gain popularity as pets in the United States and Europe. This surge in popularity can be attributed to the efforts of a British man named Albert Marsh, who successfully bred and domesticated Syrian hamsters (*Mesocricetus auratus*) in captivity. These hamsters, known for their gentle temperament and compact size, quickly captured the hearts of pet enthusiasts.

In 1946, the first hamsters were exported from Syria to the United States, where they were marketed as "pocket pets" or "children's pets" due to their small size and easy maintenance. The introduction of commercially bred hamsters paved the way for their widespread popularity as household pets.

Over the decades, hamsters have become one of the most popular small pets worldwide, cherished for their playful antics, low-maintenance care requirements, and compact size. They are especially beloved by children and apartment dwellers due to their suitability for smaller living spaces.

Today, there are several species of hamsters commonly kept as pets, including the Syrian hamster (also known as the golden hamster), dwarf hamsters (such as the Roborovski, Campbell's, and Winter White), and Chinese hamsters. Each species has its own unique characteristics and care needs, providing pet owners with a variety of options to choose from.

Hamsters have also become the subject of specialized breeding programs aimed at producing unique coat colors, patterns, and mutations. These selective breeding efforts have resulted in a wide array of hamster varieties available to pet owners, ranging from the classic golden to the exotic long-haired and satin-coated varieties.

Despite their popularity as pets, hamsters still retain many of their wild instincts and behaviors, such as hoarding food, burrowing, and running (on exercise wheels). Providing a suitable environment with plenty of enrichment and opportunities for natural behavior is essential for ensuring the health and well-being of pet hamsters. Unfortunately, however, many pet stores nowadays sell cages that are much too small. This can cause unnecessary stress, which can lead to cage-biting and damage to teeth. Rather than purchasing a small store-bought cage, consider instead buying a larger container.

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

Comprehension Quiz Practice – Hamsters as Pets

● **Choose the best answers.**

1. **In which part of the world did the first recorded capture of a hamster occur?**
 - a) Turkey
 - b) Syria
 - c) Jerusalem
 - d) Egypt
2. **Why were hamsters first sent to various countries across the globe?**
 - a) for sale as pets
 - b) for zoo collections
 - c) for sale as restaurant food
 - d) for use in research laboratories
3. **When did hamsters first become popular as pets?**
 - a) 1920s
 - b) 1930s
 - c) 1940s
 - d) 1950s
4. **Who first successfully bred and domesticated hamsters as pets?**
 - a) Albert Marsh
 - b) Israel Aharoni
 - c) George Waterhouse
 - d) no one is sure
5. **Which species of hamster were once known as “pocket pets” in the USA?**
 - a) Chinese hamsters
 - b) dwarf hamsters
 - c) European hamsters
 - d) Syrian hamsters
6. **The Roborovski, Campbell’s, and Winter White are what kind of hamster species?**
 - a) Chinese hamsters
 - b) dwarf hamsters
 - c) European hamsters
 - d) Syrian hamsters
7. **What accounts for the large number of hamster varieties nowadays?**
 - a) evolution
 - b) discovery of new species
 - c) selective breeding
 - d) marketing practices
8. **Some hamsters bite their cages. What is mentioned as a possible cause?**
 - a) cages that are too small
 - b) a desire to be with other hamsters
 - c) not enough food
 - d) loud noises

● **Discuss the following questions with a classmate.**

1. Have you ever had a pet hamster? If yes, describe your experience.
2. Do you think hamsters make good pets? Why? / Why not?
3. Would you like to have a pet hamster? Why? / Why not?
4. What other small animals might make good pets?
5. Compare and contrast having a pet hamster with having a pet cat. How might they be similar? How might they be different?
6. Imagine you are ten years old and you really want a pet hamster for your birthday, but your mother says no. Think of at least five reasons that having a pet hamster would be a good idea.
7. Imagine your ten-year-old son really wants a pet hamster, but you don’t think it’s a good idea. Think of at least five reasons why a pet hamster is a bad idea.

Comprehension Quiz

How Hamsters Became Pets

Level Advanced

Time Approximately 20 minutes

“How Hamsters Became Pets: A Brief History”

As **Reading Quiz Practice** – or as **Listening Quiz Practice**



Downloadable Audio File: 3 minutes and 22 seconds



ANSWER KEY

- | | |
|------|------|
| 1. B | 5. D |
| 2. D | 6. B |
| 3. C | 7. C |
| 4. A | 8. A |

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Grades as percentages

$$8 / 8 = 100\%$$

$$7 / 8 = 87.5$$

$$6 / 8 = 75$$

$$5 / 8 = 62.5$$

$$4 / 8 = 50$$

$$3 / 8 = 37.5$$

$$2 / 8 = 25$$

$$1 / 8 = 12.5$$

$$0 / 8 = 0$$

*In loving memory of our furry
little family member,
Mr. Fuzzypants.*

