Handling a hamster frequently makes these cheeky animals more gentle pets.

Hamsters often are pugnacious animals; however, many of them make gentle pets when handled frequently. The hamster commonly seen as a pet is the Syrian or golden hamster, *Mesocricetus auratus*. They are a light golden brown color.

Two species of hamsters are rarely seen as pets: 1) the European hamster, *Cricetus cricetus*, light brown with a black belly and white areas on the face; and 2) the Chinese hamster, *Cricetulus griseus*, characterized by a black dorsal strip and a light brown to gray and white coat color.

Hamsters are nocturnal, their gestation period is extremely short (14 days), and they have extensive cheek pouches to carry food and move their babies from one location to another. The ham-
Hamsters are escape artists, so get a secure, solid cage. Clean, fresh water should be available continuously. Hardwood chips, ground corncobs and shredded paper all make good bedding materials.
ster uses pigmented flank organs (sebaceous glands), located high on the thigh, for territorial marking.

**Escape Artists**
Hamsters are extremely adept at escaping from their cages. So it is extremely important that lids and doors have secure latches and that cages are solidly constructed.

Generally, wire bar, plastic, metal, or glass solid-bottom shoe box cages are used, and most have clip-on wire bar or solid metal tops. Many people equip their cages with tunnels and exercise wheels; however, exercise wheels are often the cause of broken legs, especially when used in wire bar cages.

Hardwood chips, ground corncobs, and shredded paper are acceptable as bedding materials. Adult hamsters require a floor area of at least 20 square inches with a cage height of 6". A female hamster should have 150 square inches of floor space.

**May Hibernate**
Environmental temperatures between 65° and 75° F generally are acceptable. Hamsters will hibernate at temperatures below 48° F and also if the daily period of light is very short—less than 2 hours a day. Pelleted rodent feeds, available commercially from major feed suppliers, generally are readily available and acceptable. Mixed seeds can be used as a treat. Clean, fresh water should be available continuously.

Hamsters occasionally are difficult to breed successfully. Both hand mating and monogamous mating systems can result in fighting.

Cannibalism can be a serious problem. The incidence may be reduced by providing sufficient nesting materials, a dark hiding place free from disturbance, prevention of sudden noises, and separation of males from pregnant and lactating females. Generally the young should not be handled during the first week of life.

Hamsters frequently fight with each other. Severe bite wounds, occasionally resulting in death, are often inflicted. To reduce fighting it is best to house animals together early in life, at weaning rather than at several months of age.

**Diseases**
Hamsters generally are quite healthy animals, and disease outbreaks usually are rare.

The most important disease seen in hamsters has been given a variety of names:
Keeping hamsters healthy is relatively easy as long as good sanitation and good quality food are provided.

*hamster enteritis*, wet tail, proliferative enteritis, ileal hyperplasia. A specific etiology has not been found. An as-yet-unidentified intracellular bacterium may play an important role, although several different causes—bacteria, viruses, diet, poor sanitation—may be involved.

Affected animals go off feed, have rough hair coats, become debilitated, and have a mild to severe watery diarrhea. Rectal prolapse, seen as a red protrusion from the anus, may occur. High death rates often occur within 1 to 2 days after the initial clinical signs.

All ages of hamsters can be affected, but animals 3 to 8 weeks old are the most susceptible. Intestinal lesions often appear as enlargements or growths, hence the name proliferative ileitis and ileal hyperplasia.

Systemic antibiotics (tetracycline, gentamicin, tylosin, ...
neomycin) and supportive therapy (oral administration of whole milk, buttermilk) may be beneficial, although response to treatment is often poor. Good sanitation and good quality food help in prevention.

Both Salmonella and Bacillus piliformis cause disease in hamsters. The lesions are found in the liver and intestinal tract.

**Parasites**

Pinworms (Syphacia obvelata) and tapeworms (Hymenolepis nana) are found occasionally in hamsters, but clinical signs usually do not occur with either parasite. It is important to remember that Hymenolepis nana can directly infest man. Anal tape tests and fecal examinations will demonstrate the ova of pinworms, and tapeworm ova may be found on routine fecal flotation examinations.

Hamster intestines generally contain a number of different protozoan parasites—such as Giardia, Spironucleus, Trichomonas—but these parasites usually do not cause clinical disease in hamsters.

The use of several antibiotics (for example, penicillin, streptomycin, lincomycin, and erythromycin) has been associated with an occasion-

ally fatal toxic syndrome in hamsters. Broad-spectrum antibiotics such as tetracycline, chloramphenicol, and sulfonamides are usually safe.

Demodex species (hair follicle mange mites) are generally the only external parasites found in the hamster. Microscopic examination of skin scrapings will reveal the parasites. Skin lesions are not seen usually.

Staphylococcus can cause abscesses and joint infections. Hamster cheek pouches can become infected due to foreign bodies and trauma and may ulcerate through the skin. Local therapy and systemic antibiotics are generally effective.

Several outbreaks of the viral disease lymphocytic choriomeningitis have occurred in humans and been traced directly to spread by hamsters. This virus also occurs in guinea pigs, mice, nonhuman primates, dogs, and pigs.

The disease in humans varies from an absence of clinical signs to an influenza-like (flu) syndrome, although encephalitis occasionally occurs. In hamsters clinical signs generally are absent, and specific testing is required for diagnosis. A number of commercial diagnostic laboratories provide this testing service.