

**CODE OF RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR THE WELFARE OF GERBILS – DUTY OF CARE  
TO A GERBIL**

**(Published for the 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2025)**

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Ordinance, 2012

# The Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Gerbils – Duty of Care to a Gerbil

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## Understanding the Animal Welfare (Guernsey) Ordinance, 2012 Introduction to the Code

Owning and caring for a gerbil can be a source of great enjoyment, but you should be aware that like any pet, gerbil ownership is a major responsibility. Typically, gerbils can live for about 3-4 years. Consequently, you should think carefully about all factors that will affect your ability to care for a gerbil and whether a gerbil is suitable for you. Would you be able to provide for all of their needs? You will need to consider the space available at your property, and the financial and time implications of having a gerbil as a pet. Caring for a gerbil can be expensive and you should consider whether, for instance, you would be able to afford the cost of veterinary treatment or pet health insurance.

Being able to own a pet is not a human right. If you are a tenant, you must ask permission of your landlord before you take on ownership of a gerbil. Some landlords require enhanced deposits from pet owners to insure against the increased risk of damage to the property by pets.

Even the best laid plans can go wrong, we are all susceptible to the unexpected, be it loss of a job or family member, a personal illness, an expensive bill, a relationship breakdown or even imprisonment. Changes in an owner's circumstances can impact on their ability to meet their pet's welfare needs. While you cannot plan for every eventuality, it is good to have someone who would be able to step in to help. If you are unable to care for your gerbil at any time, you must make arrangements for another suitable person to look after it on your behalf. Furthermore, if you are the head of the household of a child under the age of 16 years old, you are responsible for any animal that child looks after or owns. If you own or are responsible for a gerbil and fail to meet its welfare needs or cause it unnecessary suffering, you may be prosecuted under the Animal Welfare (Guernsey) Ordinance, 2012 (the 'Ordinance').

There is no one "perfect" way to care for all gerbils because every gerbil, and every situation, is different but they all have the same needs. It is up to you to find out the precise needs of your gerbil and how to meet them. Under Section 8 of the Ordinance, the owner or keeper of an animal owes a duty to take such care as, in all circumstances, is reasonable to see that the animal is free –

- from thirst, hunger and malnutrition, by free access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour
- from discomfort, by providing an appropriate environment including suitable shelter and a comfortable resting area
- from pain, injury and disease, by prevention or by the provision of timely veterinary diagnosis and treatment
- from fear and distress by ensuring conditions and treatment to avoid mental suffering, and

- to express normal behaviour patterns by providing sufficient space, environmental enrichment, and companionship, whether that be of the animal's own kind, a compatible species, and especially in the case of dogs, human company.

### **How to provide a suitable diet for your gerbil**

Diet includes water, and gerbils always need access to fresh, clean drinking water to keep them hydrated. Without water to drink, gerbils will become distressed and seriously ill, especially during hot weather.

A gerbil needs a well-balanced diet to stay fit and healthy. Diets designed for other animals may not be suitable for gerbils, and some foods commonly found in the home, such as potatoes, rhubarb and grapes can be harmful or even fatal to gerbils.

An individual gerbil's nutritional needs depends on their age, the type of food, bodyweight and level of activity. Some gerbils, such as those that are pregnant, nursing or in poor health will have special dietary needs.

If gerbils eat more food than they need, they will become overweight and may suffer. If you underfeed your gerbils, they will lose weight and may become ill. Healthy adult gerbils should maintain a stable body weight that is neither too thin nor too fat.

Sudden changes in their diet can make your gerbils ill. Any dietary changes, including treats, should be made gradually over a period of time.

### **What you should do**

Provide your gerbils with fresh, clean drinking water at all times in a way that they are used to, ideally a gravity fill drinking bottle. Provide several bottles so that all your gerbils can drink at the same time. Keep the water vessel clean and frequently refreshed.

Make sure your gerbil eats a balanced diet suitable for their individual needs and maintains a stable weight that is neither over nor underweight for their age, level of activity, sex, breed, and state of health.

Recommended diets for gerbils are available in the form of complete dry mixes which include seeds, protein, grains and pulses as well as complete pellets.

Read and be guided by the feeding instructions relating to any commercial gerbil food you buy. Adjust how much of this is offered depending on your individual gerbil. They should also be offered the small amounts of safe fruit, vegetables and herbs.

Remove any uneaten food and change the amount so that they eat all of it and stay a healthy weight.

Do not change their diet suddenly. Any new foods, or changes, to the diet should be made gradually over several days.

Be aware that any change in the amount that your gerbil eats or drinks, or a change in food preference may be a sign of ill health and you should consult your vet.

If you are uncertain what to do, you should seek advice on feeding your gerbil from a vet, veterinary nurse, or other reliable source.

### **How to provide a suitable environment for your gerbil**

Your gerbil needs a safe, secure and clean environment and protection from hazards. Examples of hazards include open windows and balconies, which may be inadequately protected to prevent your gerbil from falling from them; household and garden chemicals; and poisonous plants.

Gerbils are naturally inquisitive, and a gerbil may put themselves in danger if they are left to explore unsupervised.

Your gerbil needs a safe, comfortable place to rest, situated in a dry, draught-free area. Living in a cold or damp place can lead to suffering.

Gerbils must be able to avoid things that scare them. All gerbils need a place to hide where they feel safe. If unable to hide and avoid threats, your gerbil will become stressed which can lead to ill health.

Gerbils need a wide variety of enrichment items such as a wheel, tubes, platforms and lots of suitable bedding for their tunnels and burrows.

Gerbils are a prey species, and their accommodation must be secure enough to protect them from predators, such as dogs, cats, ferrets, and birds of prey. They should be housed so they are unable to see, hear or smell predator species.

### **What you should do**

Provide your gerbils with a comfortable, safe, clean, dry, quiet, and draught-free environment with appropriate ventilation, temperature control and lighting (either natural or artificial) where they can rest undisturbed.

Gerbils are prone to overheating, the temperature in their enclosure away from any radiators or other heat sources.

To ensure your gerbil can thrive, you should offer as much space, choice, and enrichment as possible. Gerbils that are unable to perform natural behaviours become stressed, unwell and have a reduced lifespan.

Gerbils are very active so you should provide them with a large, safe wheel. A gerbil wheel must be large enough to allow them to run with a flat back as running with an arched back can cause spinal issues. Saucer like wheels are not recommended as the gerbil must run in a curve which can injure their spine.

Gerbils burrow and create complex tunnel systems, you can help them do this by giving them bedding material that's deep enough to allow them to burrow into the dark, but that doesn't stop you from being able to check on them. It is also important to include material that will hold the shape of the tunnel.

Give them enough warm bedding - this should be safe to eat, such as dust-free hay or non-toxic paper. Don't use softwood products such as pine, as these can cause illness, and don't give them nesting materials that separate into thin strands, such as cotton wool or similar 'fluffy' bedding products as they can become tangled in them. The best type is dry, dust-free, absorbent wood shavings supplemented with hay to allow animals to tunnel and hide.

Your gerbil's accommodation must be cleaned regularly enough to keep it safe and hygienic, but not so often that they are frequently disturbed, and you destroy their tunnelling system. Each day spot clean, remove poo, dirty and damp bedding, and any uneaten food. When doing a full clean, always use a pet-safe disinfectant to clean the cage. Take the opportunity to add a few new enrichment items for your gerbil to explore.

Always put some old (unsoiled) bedding back after a deep clean so that your gerbils don't get stressed from losing the scent of the cage. Only let your gerbils back in to their home when it is completely dry.

Gerbils are easily startled and may injure themselves if they panic. Cages must be sited so that gerbils are not exposed to sudden loud noises. Provide your gerbils with a hiding place each which they have constant access to, where they can escape if they feel afraid.

If you are going away, make sure your gerbils are only ever left with a competent person who can meet their welfare needs.

### **How to ensure your gerbil is fit and healthy**

Gerbils feel pain however, as prey animals, they may not show outward signs of suffering or being in pain. Any changes in the way a gerbil behaves can be an early sign that they may be ill or in pain.

They may:

- stop or reduce eating and lose weight,
- drink water excessively, less, or not at all,
- become withdrawn and unwilling to exercise or play,
- vocalise when touched,
- show uncharacteristic fear or aggression when approached,
- try to hide.

They may also show specific signs of ill health such as:

- discharges from the eyes, ears, or nose,
- excessive salivation,

- difficulties passing urine, diarrhoea (wet tail), or constipation,
- coughing or wheezing,
- excessively scratching and developing skin sores,
- hair loss
- limping or swellings.

This list is for guidance only and is not exhaustive.

Gerbils are vulnerable to a range of infectious diseases, parasites, and other illnesses. Your vet can advise on ways to protect your gerbil's health and welfare including vaccination, parasite treatment and neutering.

Dental problems are common in gerbils and include overgrown teeth, spurs, tooth root abscesses, and broken teeth. Only a vet should correct overgrown or misaligned teeth.

Overgrown nails are a common problem in gerbils and can cause pain and much more serious problems if the nails then grow into the pads.

Gerbil's whiskers are delicate and more sensitive than human fingertips. Gerbils brush these long hairs against objects or the floor, helping them build up a detailed picture of their surroundings and guide them around their environment, as well as to balance.

Gerbils produce two types of droppings - hard, dry pellets and softer, moist pellets which they eat directly from their bottoms. Consumption of these droppings are essential to their health.

Gerbils can enter a short-term hibernation state called "torpor", especially if cold, which typically lasts for a few hours to a few days.

Placing gerbils on their back invokes a fear response that causes extreme stress.

If you decide to breed your gerbil, your vet can advise on the risks of inherited conditions and exaggerated features that could affect the welfare of the pups. Caring for pups is difficult and time-consuming, and the pups are your responsibility, with the same needs as any gerbil under the Ordinance.

### What you should do

Take sensible precautions to keep your gerbil safe from injury, fear, and distress, including prevention of access to poisonous food, plants, chemicals, medicines, electrical cables, and any other hazards. You should always consult your vet if you are concerned that your gerbil has eaten or come into contact with anything that could be harmful.

Get to know what is normal for your gerbil. Monitor your gerbil daily and watch out for changes in behaviour or signs of injury, disease, or illness. Make sure someone else does this if you are away.

Ask your vet how often your gerbil needs a health check, and about the things you can do to protect your gerbil's health. You should follow the advice you are given.

If you recognise signs and symptoms of disease or suspect that your gerbil is in pain, ill or injured; contact a vet promptly and follow veterinary advice regarding their treatment. If at any time you have concerns about the health or welfare of your gerbil, you should seek advice from a vet or registered veterinary nurse.

You need to familiarise yourself with the size and amount of hard, dry pellets that your gerbils produce daily and note any change to the size or consistency of these. Any uneaten moist droppings in their environment or stuck to them is an indication that there is a health or dietary problem. Veterinary advice should be sought in either event.

Gerbils are naturally very clean and spend a lot of time grooming themselves and produce an oil to keep their coats healthy. Provide your gerbil with a sand bath as big as possible and use rough chinchilla or reptile sand.

Gerbil teeth should be regularly checked to ensure they are not overgrown or misaligned. Never attempt to treat or trim your gerbil's teeth at home, only a vet should correct these problems.

Check your gerbil's nails regularly. Seek advice if you are not confident trimming your gerbil's nails.

Gerbils should never be placed in exercise balls as they restrict their ability to use their whiskers to explore and make judgements about the environment, resulting in high levels of stress.

If you suspect your gerbil may be in a state of 'torpor' you can perform a few checks, such as observing for breathing, gently feeling their chest for a heartbeat, or gently stroking them to see if they twitch their whiskers.

Seek the advice of your vet if you are considering having your gerbil neutered. They will be able to advise you about the best age and time to have this done.

Seek the advice of your vet before breeding your gerbil and take all reasonable steps to ensure that you will be able to provide the care required during pregnancy, as well as finding suitable homes for the pups before your gerbil is bred.

Wherever possible, all interactions with gerbils should take place at ground level. If it is necessary to pick up a gerbil, only an adult or responsible older child should do this.

Gerbils should be handled appropriately and not placed on their backs or picked up by the scruff of their neck or their tails.

Use positive reinforcement training to help your gerbil willingly participate in home husbandry, grooming and vet visits. Seek advice from a qualified trainer who can help you teach cooperative care and management techniques.

## **How to provide the right companionship for your gerbil**

Gerbils are sociable animals that need, and enjoy, the companionship of at least one other friendly gerbil. Consequently, many gerbils do not like being alone and will suffer if left without company or enrichment.

Gerbils usually get on well with other gerbils when they have been properly introduced. Other species of pets are not suitable companions for gerbils.

Gerbils that have been incorrectly introduced to other gerbils, or have been housed with an incompatible gerbil, may be afraid and experience behavioural issues resulting from these experiences. These gerbils may be harder to successfully introduce to a new companion, however, efforts should still be made to do so.

Gerbils get to know the people with whom they regularly interact and can trust. They can become confused and distressed if the behaviour of people is inconsistent and unpredictable. Provide your gerbils with regular opportunities to interact with friendly people. Ensure those handling your gerbil do so gently and do not frighten them or pick them up by their scruff, or their tail.

It is never acceptable to frighten a rabbit, cause pain, injure or encourage them to behave aggressively by teasing or tormenting them.

### **What you should do:**

Gerbils are naturally sociable animals and should be kept with at least one other compatible gerbil.

Gerbils should be introduced gradually on neutral territory, paying attention to the behaviour of both individual gerbils at all times. If chasing or fighting behaviour occurs regularly, talk to your vet who may be able to refer you to a clinical animal behaviourist.

Gerbils should be provided with the biggest area possible that allows them to be near, and apart from, their companions and express natural behaviours such as sprawling, running and climbing.

Provide sufficient resources for all gerbils e.g. toys, bedding, toilet areas and hiding places and give them enough space so they can get away from one another if they want to.

You should ensure that gerbils in your care have the opportunity to positively interact with people every day. Gerbils must have space when meeting people so they can choose to move away if they become overwhelmed. Do not restrain them and insist they are petted, as this can create a fear response.

Be consistent, kind, and gentle in the way you, your family, and friends, react to your gerbil. Never leave your gerbil unsupervised with another animal or person who may harm or frighten them, such as young children who may unintentionally do this.

When you are away, make sure your gerbil is properly cared for by a responsible person. When someone else is looking after your gerbil they also have a legal responsibility to ensure its welfare, and you should ensure that they understand its needs and any special requirements that it may have.

If your gerbil shows signs of fear or aggression, calmly remove them from the situation and seek advice from a vet, veterinary nurse, or ethical trainer/behaviourist.

### **How to provide for your gerbil's behavioural needs**

How a gerbil behaves depends on its age, personality, and past experiences. Gerbils are active, playful, inquisitive, sociable animals and need to live with another gerbil.

Gerbils are intelligent animals and can suffer from boredom and loneliness. If your gerbils are not mentally and physically stimulated, they may suffer or engage in stress behaviours, such as chewing their bars or nipping.

Aggressive displays or changes in behaviour, including hiding or dietary changes, may indicate that something is wrong with the gerbil's physical and mental health.

Gerbils experience a range of emotions including happiness, anxiety, fearfulness, and anger. How they behave and their body language can help you understand what they are feeling and whether they are physically and mentally fit and healthy.

Gerbils' natural behaviours include digging, burrowing and foraging. They must be able to perform all these behaviours in their enclosure.

### **What you should do:**

Make sure your gerbils receive enough mental, social and physical stimulation to satisfy their individual behavioural needs.

Provide your gerbils with safe enrichment items and regular opportunities to interact with friendly people.

Gerbils are crepuscular, meaning they are most active at dawn, dusk and overnight. Keep feeding times, cleaning and interactions to these times when your gerbil is most active.

Don't house them in areas that have lots of activity during the day so they can rest undisturbed.

Make sure your gerbils can reach all the things they need (e.g. bedding, food, water, toilet areas, toys) without having to get too close to things, people or other animals that may scare them.

Never shout at or punish your gerbils. They will not understand and will just become more nervous or scared. You should only use positive reward-based training.

Early life experiences can affect how gerbils behave. Gerbils should be very slowly and gently handled when they are young and allowed to experience other everyday noises and stimuli that they will likely face when older. Build their trust by letting them come to you.

### **Understanding gerbil behaviour:**

It is important to observe body language in context. Almost all behaviours, when observed on their own, could mean a number of different things in different contexts.

You should know the behaviour of your gerbil when it is fit and healthy and be able to recognise and understand the signs your gerbil, and others, use when they are worried, distressed, frightened or feeling unwell.

Here are some signs to look out for that may show your gerbil is happy:

- Belly rubbing
- Playing and being curious
- Showing affection, such as nibbling (a type of grooming)
- Teeth grinding, 'bruxing'
- Squeaking, quiet grunts, and purring

Behaviours which may be associated with stress include:

- Foot stomping
- Making (unusual to them) distress vocalisations
- Hiding to avoid being touched
- Excessive cleaning or chewing of their feet, flanks and fur
- Changes to their feeding or toileting habits
- Over-drinking or not drinking
- Reluctance to move or a change in movement, or
- Repetitive movements, such as racing back and forth, jumping up
- Bar biting
- Wall climbing
- An absence of behaviour normal for the individual

If their behaviour changes or becomes a problem they could be distressed, bored, ill or injured and you should seek advice from a vet or other suitably qualified rodent care specialist.

### **How to safely transport your gerbil**

A gerbil that is transported in a vehicle should be restrained in a secure container. Putting familiar smelling items and something they can hide in their carrier can help make your gerbils feel at ease.

The vehicle must maintain a comfortable temperature in the space where the gerbil is kept.

Never leave an animal in a vehicle in direct strong sunshine or high temperatures. The temperature inside a car in full sun on a hot day can quickly rise to double the temperature outside, leading rapidly to distress for any animal in the vehicle. Overheating, distress, and suffering is likely when the temperature goes above 25°C for more than a few minutes.

What you should do:

Provide a secure carrier, for your gerbil that is large enough for them to comfortably stand up, turn around and stretch.

Don't transport your gerbil in a way that it could come to harm, e.g. whilst unrestrained in a vehicle with the windows wide open.

Do not leave your gerbil unattended in situations, or for periods of time that are likely to cause them distress or render them unsafe.

This Code of Recommendation applies to all Gerbils.

The purpose of the Code is to provide practical guidance to help you to comply with the provisions set out under Section 8 of the Animal Welfare (Guernsey) Ordinance 2012 (weblink to the Ordinance). It does not tell you precisely how to care for your gerbil, but it does summarise important things you should know and what to do when making decisions about how best to care for your gerbil.

A failure to comply with the Code of Recommendations may be relied upon in court as tending to establish liability for failing to meet the duty of care.

If you are unsure about anything to do with the care and welfare of your gerbil, you should always seek advice from an expert such as a veterinary surgeon or "other suitably qualified" specialists. These are people who hold the qualifications and experience to provide expert advice on gerbil welfare and behaviour.