

WALNUT CREEK SUPPLY

THE COMPLETE CARE GUIDE

Small Animals

Which critter is right for your family?



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New owner? Go straight to Section 1. It is written so you can set up a safe, correct home and get through the first 48 hours without reading anything else first.

Small animals are some of the most lovable pets a family can bring home. They are also some of the most misunderstood. A rabbit, a guinea pig, a hamster and a chinchilla may all be sold from the same shelf in the same store, under the same cheerful label of "starter pet," and yet they have almost nothing in common. One lives eight to twelve years and needs a room to run in. One lives two years and runs miles on a wheel at 2 a.m. One must never live alone, and another must never live with anyone. One is perfectly legal on our side of the state line and two are against the law right here in Pennsylvania. Picking the right critter is the single most important animal-care decision you will make, and it happens before you ever buy a bag of food.

That is why we wrote this guide. It will not tell you which animal to love. It will help you match your family, your home, your schedule and your budget to the species that will genuinely thrive with you, and it will be honest about the ones that are poor first choices. For every species we cover here, we also have a full care guide with the deep detail, linked throughout. Start with the Quick Start checklist, find your family in the comparison chart, and then follow the link to the species guide that fits. Take your time. A good decision made slowly is a kindness to a small animal that cannot choose for itself.

SECTION 1

Quick Start: Choosing Your First Small Animal

Before you fall for a face, work through this checklist. Write your answers down, ideally with everyone in the household. If an honest answer surprises you, that is exactly the point of doing this first.

1. **Count the years.** Fancy mice live roughly 1.5 to 3 years. Rats live about 2 to 3. Hamsters live about 1.5 to 3.5 years depending on type. Gerbils live 3 to 5, guinea pigs 4 to 8, ferrets 5 to 10, rabbits 8 to 12, degus 6 to 8, and chinchillas commonly 10 to 20. Sugar gliders can reach 10 to 15. Ask yourself who will be caring for this animal in year five, and in year twelve. If a child is asking today, remember that the child may be heading off to college before a rabbit or chinchilla is done.
2. **Be honest about time.** Every small animal needs fresh food and water and a quick health look every single day, including holidays and sick days. Social, intelligent species such as rats, ferrets, degus and rabbits need an hour or more of active interaction and out-of-cage time daily. If your weekdays are packed, favor a lower-contact species such as gerbils or a pair of hamsters in separate setups, and be realistic about what you can offer.
3. **Measure your space.** The cages sold as "starter kits" are usually far too small. Rabbits need a pen or a rabbit-proofed room, not a cage. Guinea pigs need a pair-sized floor of about 10.5 square feet. Chinchillas, rats, degus and ferrets need tall, multi-level housing. Mark the floor with tape before you buy anything.
4. **Plan the budget for the whole life, not the purchase day.** The animal itself is usually the smallest cost. Housing, bedding, food, hay or fresh produce, enrichment, and especially veterinary care add up. Vets who see exotic small mammals charge more than a typical dog-and-cat visit, and an emergency can be expensive. Set money aside for a first checkup and an emergency fund before you bring anyone home.
5. **Know who does the daily care.** If the plan is "the kids will do it," plan again. Children can be wonderful helpers, but an adult must be the responsible keeper, check the animal every day, and step in on the days a child forgets.
6. **Check allergies first.** Hay, bedding dust and animal dander are common triggers. Spend time around the species, ideally at a rescue or a friend's home, before you commit. Hay allergy in particular is a problem for rabbit, guinea pig, chinchilla and degu families.
7. **Think about the animals you already have.** Cats, dogs and ferrets see small prey animals as exactly that. A calm dog can learn to leave a rabbit alone, but the animal's room should be closed to pets, and high-stress species such as chinchillas and hamsters are best kept entirely behind a closed door.
8. **Match the species to the children's ages.** Small animals are fragile, and most are prey animals who panic when grabbed. Young children can enjoy rats and guinea pigs with close adult supervision, but nearly every small animal does best with

calm, seated, supervised handling. We cover this species by species below.

9. **Check the law before you fall in love.** Hedgehogs and sugar gliders are illegal as pets in Pennsylvania. Ferrets are banned in some places elsewhere. Other rules vary by state, county and town. See Legal & Ethical Sourcing below.
10. **Find your vet before you need one.** Many general veterinary practices do not see small exotic mammals. Call ahead, ask whether they see your species specifically, and keep the after-hours emergency number on the refrigerator.

Two more questions help families more than any chart. Is this animal active when we are awake? And are we ready to be the person who notices when something is quietly wrong? Small prey animals hide illness, so the keeper's observation is the main health system they have.

First-Time Starter Bundle

These are the things every new keeper of any small animal needs in the house on day one, regardless of species. The species guides have the exact specifications.

Essentials

- **A correctly sized, secure enclosure with a solid floor.** Bigger is almost always better, and the enclosure type depends on the animal: a glass tank for deep-burrowing rodents, a tall wire cage with narrow bar spacing for climbers, a puppy exercise pen for rabbits, and a ground-level setup for guinea pigs and hedgehogs. Avoid wire-mesh floors; they injure feet.
- **Safe, absorbent bedding or litter.** Paper-based and aspen bedding, fleece liners and hay all have their place depending on species. Avoid scented products and cedar. Dust and fragrance irritate tiny respiratory systems.
- **A species-appropriate staple diet.** This might be unlimited grass hay, plain pellets, a lab block, a quality seed-and-grain mix, a meat-based kibble or an insect-supplemented diet. The right base food is different for every group; see Diet & Nutrition below. No mystery ingredients, and no colorful "gourmet" mixes.
- **A sturdy water bottle, plus a heavy ceramic bowl where the species allows it.** Check that the bottle flows every day.
- **At least one hide per animal.** Prey animals need cover to feel safe. Provide one hide for each animal, plus an extra.
- **A heavy ceramic food dish.** Light plastic dishes get tipped, chewed and carried off.
- **A thermometer placed at animal level.** Many small animals tolerate heat poorly. A reading in the room where the cage sits is more useful than your own sense of comfort.
- **Chew items made of safe, untreated wood or hay.** Rodents, rabbits, chinchillas and degus have teeth that grow for life and must be worn down.
- **A secure travel carrier.** For vet visits, power cuts and cleaning day.
- **A spot-cleaning kit.** A small scoop, brush and a pet-safe cleaner kept in the same room make daily cleaning quick.

Ready to set up? Browse the essentials in our collections: Critter Enclosures and Critter Bedding and Accessories.

Enrichment

- **A wheel of the correct size and type, if the species uses one.** It must have a solid running surface and be large enough that the spine stays straight. Rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas should not use a wheel; the species guides explain which animals should.
- **Digging and burrowing material.** Deep, tunnel-holding substrate for hamsters, gerbils and mice; a digging box for rabbits; a shallow nesting pocket for others.

- **Foraging toys and scatter feeding.** Hiding food in paper, hay or cardboard turns mealtime into a job, which is exactly what these animals evolved to do.
- **Cardboard tubes, boxes and tunnels.** Cheap, replaceable and endlessly interesting.
- **A dust or sand bath, for the species that need one.** Chinchillas and degus require a special dust bath for coat health; gerbils and hamsters enjoy a sand bath for grooming.
- **Climbing structures and ledges.** Hardwood branches, platforms and ropes for rats, chinchillas, degus, ferrets and gliders.
- **Hammocks, tunnels and sleep sacks.** For rats, ferrets and gliders in particular, who love to nest in soft, enclosed places.
- **A safe play area.** A secure, escape-proofed pen or room for daily supervised exploration, which many of these species need.
- **Time with you.** Quiet talking, sitting beside the enclosure, hand-feeding approved treats and learning each animal's body language is the best enrichment of all.

Enrichment, one click away. Shop Critter Toys and Accessories.

SECTION 2

Meet the Small Animals

Here are the eleven species in this guide, in plain language, with the honest version of each. Every one has its own full care guide; follow the links to go deeper.

Rabbit

Rabbits are intelligent, expressive, social animals who can learn their names, use a litter pan and greet you at the door. They are also a lot more work than their reputation suggests. Size varies enormously by breed, from about 2 to 3 pounds for the smallest dwarfs to 8 to 11 pounds or more for standard breeds. A well-cared-for indoor rabbit commonly lives 8 to 12 years, so this is a dog-length commitment. Rabbits are crepuscular, meaning most active at dawn and dusk, which fits a family's routine well. They need about 12 square feet of continuous home base for one small-to-medium rabbit, plus a safe exercise area and several hours out of the pen every day. They do best with a bonded partner, and spaying or neutering matters for both health and behavior. Rabbits are often bought for young children, but they are fragile prey animals who frequently dislike being picked up. Think of a rabbit as a floor-level companion for gentle, patient people, not a cuddly toy. Rescues often have rabbits, and sometimes already-bonded pairs, waiting for homes.

Guinea Pig

Guinea pigs, or cavies, are vocal, gentle, food-loving animals who "wheek" for vegetables and purr when content. Adults weigh about 1.5 to 2.5 pounds and measure 8 to 12 inches. They typically live 4 to 8 years, with 5 to 7 the most common range. They are obligately social: two or more, never one. A pair needs a minimum of about 10.5 square feet of floor, far larger than most pet-store cages. They are crepuscular, active in bursts through the day. Guinea pigs make a lovely first pet for a family, provided an adult does the care and children handle them seated and gently. They need daily vitamin C from fresh vegetables or fortified pellets, and unlimited hay. Rescues and shelters frequently have bonded pairs, and adopting a pair is the easiest start of all.

Hamster

Hamsters are tiny, busy, solitary animals who stuff their cheeks, build hoards and run for miles on a wheel at night. The Syrian hamster is the largest at 5 to 7 inches and 120 to 200 grams, and lives about 2 to 3 years. Dwarf types, such as Roborovski, Russian and Campbell's, are much smaller and shorter-lived at roughly 1.5 to 3.5 years depending on type. Syrian hamsters must live strictly alone, and dwarf hamsters usually do best alone too. Hamsters are crepuscular with plenty of night activity, which makes them a poor fit for a child's bedroom. A hamster needs at least 450 square inches of unbroken floor (many aim for 600 to 800), deep bedding to burrow in, and a large solid wheel. Hamsters bite when startled or woken, so they suit patient, calm older children and adults better than small children.

Gerbil

Gerbils are active, curious desert animals from Mongolia and northern China. Adults are about 4 to 5 inches long plus a tufted tail and weigh roughly 60 to 110 grams, and they live about 3 to 5 years. They are clan animals and must be kept in same-sex pairs or small groups, never alone. A pair needs at least a 20-gallon long glass tank with deep substrate for tunneling. Gerbils keep a polyphasic schedule, with short bursts of activity around the clock, so they are not strictly nocturnal, but you will still hear them in the evening. They rarely bite, are less odorous than many rodents and are a great watch-and-enjoy animal, which makes them a very good first rodent for responsible families.

Fancy Rat

Fancy rats are clever, affectionate, trainable animals whose bond with their keepers is often compared to a dog's. Adults are 9 to 11 inches long, not including the tail, and weigh 250 to 500 grams, with females smaller. They live only 2 to 3 years, rarely beyond 3. They must be kept in same-sex pairs or groups. They are crepuscular and night-active, sleeping 12 to 14 hours a day.

They need a tall, multi-level wire cage (about four cubic feet per rat, so at least eight cubic feet for a pair) and at least an hour of supervised free-roam each day. For a family that wants a pet to interact with, rats are among the most rewarding of all small animals, though the short lifespan and their vulnerability to respiratory illness and tumors are a real emotional cost.

Fancy Mouse

Fancy mice are quick, tiny, agile animals, 3 to 4 inches long (not counting the tail) and weighing 1 to 2 ounces. They live just 1.5 to 3 years. Does (females) are social and do well in groups of two to four; bucks (males) are typically solitary unless they are littermates bonded from young, and they have the strongest odor. Mice are nocturnal, so they sleep through the day and are loudest when the house is quiet. A 10-gallon aquarium is the minimum for one or two mice, with a 20-gallon long better for a small group. They are a lovely watch-and-enjoy pet, but too small and fast for young children to handle, and the short lifespan comes as a shock to many families.

Chinchilla

Chinchillas are gentle, clever, astonishingly soft animals from the Andes. Adults run roughly 9 to 14 inches in body length with a bushy tail, and weigh about 400 to 800 grams. They commonly live 10 to 20 years, most often around 12 to 15. They are heat-sensitive: the room must stay around 60 to 70°F, and above 77°F is not safe. They need a dust bath, a tall multi-level cage (at least 24 by 24 by 48 inches for one, and bigger is better), and daily out-of-cage time. They are most active at dusk and overnight, are fragile, and generally do not enjoy being held. Most do well with a same-sex pair, though pairing needs care. They are wonderful display companions for a patient adult and a poor match for a child who wants a cuddle.

Degu

Degus are lively, social, daytime-active rodents from the foothills of Chile, 6 to 8 inches long and about 250 to 300 grams. They typically live 6 to 8 years, longer than most rodents. Strictly social, they must live in a group of two or more. They are diurnal and crepuscular, active in daylight and early evening, so they fit a family's waking hours better than most. A pair needs a tall multi-level wire cage (at least about 24 by 16 by 24 inches, bigger is better) with half-inch bar spacing and a dust bath. Degus have a major dietary catch: they are very sensitive to sugar, so they must have unlimited hay and sugar-free pellets, and no fruit or sweet treats. They are great for a committed, experienced keeper and not a casual impulse buy.

Ferret

Ferrets are playful, mischievous, endlessly curious carnivores who sleep 15 to 20 hours a day and then play at full speed. Adults are about 13 to 16 inches long (excluding the tail), females weigh 1.5 to 2 pounds, and males 3 to 4 pounds. They live 5 to 10 years. Ferrets can live singly with lots of attention or in pairs and groups; most do better with company. They are obligate carnivores, meaning they must eat animal protein and fat and cannot digest plant foods. They have a natural musky odor and need at least four hours of supervised free-roam in a ferret-proofed room each day. They are not rodents, and they are banned in some places (California, Hawaii and New York City). A ferret is a high-energy, high-attention pet for an experienced family with a ferret-proofed home.

African Pygmy Hedgehog

Hedgehogs are quiet, solitary, spiny little insectivores from Africa. Adults are 5 to 8 inches long and weigh 8 to 24 ounces, living 4 to 6 years, sometimes 7 or 8. They are strictly nocturnal, sleeping 16 to 18 hours a day, and must live alone. **Hedgehogs are illegal to keep or sell as pets in Pennsylvania**, where the Game Commission treats them as exotic wildlife. A bill that would legalize them has not passed. Check your own state's rules, and know that in many states hedgehogs are also restricted. If you live in Pennsylvania, this is not a species for you, however charming. We include the species here so families who live elsewhere can make an informed choice.

Sugar Glider

Sugar gliders are small, nocturnal Australian marsupials that glide between branches with a membrane of skin. Adults weigh only 4 to 5 ounces, about 12 inches long with the tail, and can live 10 to 15 years. They are colony animals and must be kept in bonded pairs or groups. They are strictly nocturnal, most active between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m., and need a tall wire cage (at least 24 by 24 by 36 inches for a pair) and a carefully balanced diet. **Sugar gliders are illegal to keep or sell as pets in Pennsylvania**, where the Game Commission treats them as exotic wildlife, and bills to legalize them have not passed. They are also restricted in other states. They are a very long, very specialized commitment, and not a casual pet in any state.

SECTION 3

Which Small Animal Is Right for You?

This is the centerpiece of the guide. All figures come from our species guides; where a figure varies by breed or source, we give a range. "Minimum enclosure" is the least we would call acceptable for the number of animals shown, not the ideal, and bigger is always better. Hedgehogs and sugar gliders are listed for completeness, but both are illegal as pets in Pennsylvania.

Species	Adult size	Lifespan	Social needs	Active	Minimum enclosure	Handling	Best for
Rabbit	About 2 to 11+ lb depending on breed	8 to 12 years	Best with a bonded partner	Dawn and dusk	About 12 sq ft home base for one small-to-medium rabbit, plus 24 to 32 sq ft of exercise space	Gentle, seated; many dislike being picked up	Patient families with space and a long horizon
Guinea Pig	1.5 to 2.5 lb, 8 to 12 in	4 to 8 years	Pair or group required	Dawn and dusk, with bursts all day	About 10.5 sq ft for two	Gentle, seated, supervised	First small pet for a family with an adult caretaker
Hamster	Syrian 5 to 7 in; dwarfs 2 to 4 in	About 1.5 to 3.5 years depending on type	Alone (Syrians strictly; dwarfs usually)	Dusk and night	At least 450 sq in of unbroken floor; 600 to 800 is better	Patient; may bite if startled	Older children and adults who enjoy evening watching
Gerbil	4 to 5 in plus tail, 60 to 110 g	3 to 5 years	Same-sex pair or group required	Short bursts, around the clock	20-gallon long tank (30 by 12 in floor) for a pair	Quick; best handled low and calm	Families who want to watch a busy burrow
Fancy Rat	9 to 11 in plus tail, 250 to 500 g	2 to 3 years	Same-sex pair or group required	Dawn, dusk and night	About 4 cu ft per rat; 8 cu ft for a pair (about 24 by 24 by 36 in class)	Very handleable and trainable	People who want an interactive, affectionate pet
Fancy Mouse	3 to 4 in plus tail, 1 to 2 oz	1.5 to 3 years	Does in groups of 2 to 4; bucks usually alone	Night	10-gallon tank for one or two	Tiny and quick; careful handling	Watch-and-enjoy pet for a calm home
Chinchilla	9 to 14 in plus tail, 400 to 800 g	10 to 20 years	Same-sex pair preferred if the pairing works	Dusk and night	At least 24 by 24 by 48 in for one; 36 by 24 by 60 in recommended	Fragile; many dislike being held	Experienced adults in a cool home

Species	Adult size	Lifespan	Social needs	Active	Minimum enclosure	Handling	Best for
Degu	6 to 8 in, 250 to 300 g	6 to 8 years	Group of two or more required	Daytime and early evening	About 24 by 16 by 24 in for two	Social and curious; takes time	Committed keepers who want a daytime pet
Ferret	13 to 16 in plus tail; 1.5 to 4 lb	5 to 10 years	Flexible; usually better in pairs	Short bursts; sleeps 15 to 20 hours	About 24 by 24 by 36 in for one; larger for a group	Playful and handleable	Experienced households with a ferret-proofed home
African Pygmy Hedgehog	5 to 8 in, 8 to 24 oz	4 to 6 years, sometimes 7 to 8	Alone	Strictly nocturnal	About 4 sq ft of solid floor	Can ball up and quill when frightened	Not legal in Pennsylvania
Sugar Glider	About 4 to 5 oz, 12 in with tail	10 to 15 years	Pair or colony required	Strictly nocturnal	About 24 by 24 by 36 in for two	Bonds closely with a patient keeper	Not legal in Pennsylvania

Choose this if...

You are looking for a first pet for a child. The most forgiving small-animal choices are a pair of guinea pigs or a pair of gerbils. Guinea pigs are sturdy for their size, vocal and gentle, and most are comfortable with seated handling; gerbils are active, rarely bite and are very low in odor. In either case an adult must be the responsible keeper, and the child's role is helper and friend. Rats are also wonderful for responsible older children, though their short lives can be hard on young hearts. Be cautious about rabbits, hamsters, mice and chinchillas for young children. Rabbits and chinchillas are fragile and often dislike being held; hamsters and mice are fast, nocturnal and easily frightened.

You are a busy adult. Gerbils, a pair of guinea pigs and a pair of rats all give you good value for the time you can spare, but nobody on this list is a no-effort pet. A pair of gerbils needs a lot less daily interaction than a rat or a ferret does. Species that demand hours of daily attention, such as rabbits (several hours out of the pen), ferrets (four hours of supervised roaming) and degus, are poor fits for a person away from home for long stretches.

You want a pet you can handle and bond with. Rats stand out here. They are social, trainable, and form real attachments. Ferrets and well-socialized rabbits can also be affectionate on their own terms, and degus bond with patient keepers. Chinchillas and hamsters are better admired than cuddled.

You want a display pet to watch. Gerbils, with their tunneling and burrowing, are marvelous to watch in a large glass tank. Degus, who are active in daylight, put on a show too. Fancy mice and hamsters are interesting to observe but are mostly night animals, so you will see the best of them at dusk or after dark.

You live in a small apartment. A pair of gerbils or a pair of mice (does) fit in the smallest footprint of any group here. Rats and degus need tall cages but little floor. Rabbits, guinea pigs, ferrets and chinchillas all need much more room than most people expect, so be honest with your measuring tape.

You want a long-term companion. Chinchillas (10 to 20 years), rabbits (8 to 12) and degus (6 to 8) have lifespans that outlast most childhoods. Be sure you want the decade, and plan who will take over if your circumstances change.

You want something short and sweet. Mice and rats live just a couple of years, and hamsters not much longer. They are lovely, but the grief comes quickly, and it can be hard on children. Talk about this before you bring them home.

Which are poor first choices? Chinchillas, degus and ferrets are rewarding but demanding, and are best for keepers who already have experience. Hedgehogs and sugar gliders are poor choices for almost everyone, and illegal in Pennsylvania. Hamsters are often sold to young children, but a hamster is a nocturnal solitary animal who may bite when woken, and is a better pet for an older child who enjoys quiet evenings. Rabbits are frequently bought as "easy" starter pets and then rehomed when families discover how much room, time and veterinary care they need.

SECTION 4

Space, Setup & Budget

Space is where most small-animal mistakes begin. The cages sold in most stores are far smaller than what any of these animals need, and the label on the box is not a welfare standard. Here is what our species guides recommend as the least you should provide, for the number of animals shown.

Species	Minimum housing	Type of housing	Floor and bedding notes
Rabbit	About 12 sq ft home base for one small-to-medium rabbit; double for a pair or large breed	Exercise pen, large cage with a solid floor, or a rabbit-proofed room	Solid floor, absorbent litter pan, hay at all times; 24 to 32 sq ft of exercise space plus several hours out daily
Guinea Pig	About 10.5 sq ft for two; 13 sq ft for three	Cubes-and-coroplast (C&C) pen or similar	Fleece liners or paper-based bedding; solid floor only
Hamster	At least 450 sq in of unbroken floor; 600 to 800 recommended	Large tank, bin cage or wide cage with a deep base	At least 6 in of bedding that holds a tunnel; solid wheel of the right diameter
Gerbil	20-gallon long tank (30 by 12 in floor) for a pair	Glass tank with a secure mesh lid	Deep substrate for tunneling; solid wheel
Fancy Rat	About 4 cu ft per rat, 8 cu ft for a pair	Tall multi-level wire cage, bar spacing 1/2 in or less	Solid levels, hammocks, litter pan
Fancy Mouse	10-gallon tank for one or two; 20-gallon long for a group	Glass tank with a secure screen lid	Deep nesting material; solid wheel
Chinchilla	At least 24 by 24 by 48 in for one; 36 by 24 by 60 in recommended; larger for a pair	Tall multi-level cage with solid shelves	Solid ledges, dust-bath area, no plastic to chew
Degu	About 24 by 16 by 24 in for two	Tall multi-level wire cage, bar spacing 1/2 in or less	Chew wood, dust bath, solid shelving
Ferret	About 24 by 24 by 36 in for one; larger for a group	Multi-level cage with secure latches	Hammocks, litter box; at least 4 hours of supervised roaming
African Pygmy Hedgehog	About 4 sq ft of solid floor	C&C pen, large bin or purpose-built enclosure	Solid floor, a safe exercise wheel, cozy hide
Sugar Glider	About 24 by 24 by 36 in for two	Tall wire cage, bar spacing 1/2 in or less	Climbing branches, pouches, a safe wheel

What it really costs

We deliberately do not put prices in this guide, because costs shift and vary by region, but we can tell you where the money goes, from the first day to the last.

Cost category	When it hits	What to know
The animal itself	Once	Usually the smallest cost. Shelter and rescue adoption fees are generally modest and often include health checks or spay or neuter.
Housing and setup	Upfront	The big first expense. Properly sized housing costs far more than a starter kit, but a good home lasts for years.
Food, hay and fresh produce	Ongoing	Rabbits, guinea pigs, chinchillas and degus go through a great deal of hay. Rabbits and guinea pigs also eat fresh vegetables every day. Ferrets, hedgehogs and gliders have specialized diets.
Bedding and litter	Ongoing	Deep burrowing substrate for hamsters and gerbils, litter and fleece for rabbits and guinea pigs. Larger enclosures use more.
Routine veterinary care	Annual	A wellness exam and a vet who sees your species. Rabbits and ferrets may also need spay or neuter, and ferrets have vaccination needs.
Emergency veterinary care	Unpredictable	Small animals hide illness until they are very sick. Dental disease, respiratory infections and intestinal slowdown can need urgent care. Set money aside.
Enrichment and replacement items	Ongoing	Chew items, tunnels, wheels, dust, cardboard and toys wear out.
Electricity and climate	Ongoing	Chinchillas need a cool room, and sugar gliders and hedgehogs need warmth, which may mean air conditioning or heating all year.

The cheapest way to keep a small animal is to buy the right housing once. The expensive way is to buy a starter kit, replace it, replace it again, and treat the avoidable illnesses that come from cramped, wrong-sized homes.

SECTION 5

Heat, Light & Habitat Basics

Small animals do not need basking lamps or UV lights the way reptiles do, but temperature, light and noise still matter a great deal, and heat is the silent danger for most of the group. The rule of thumb: if the room is uncomfortable for you in a sweater, it is probably uncomfortable for them. Put a thermometer at animal level and read it at the hottest part of the day.

Species	Temperature notes	Light and activity	Habitat notes
Rabbit	Heat is the main danger; keep the room comfortably cool and never let it get hot	Dawn and dusk activity; normal room light	Indoor housing is safest; quiet, away from drafts and direct sun
Guinea Pig	65 to 75°F; above 80°F risks heatstroke	Normal room light; no special lamp	Away from windows and loud appliances; floor-level housing
Hamster	Steady 65 to 75°F	Dusk and night active; keep out of a child's bedroom	Out of direct sun, vents and drafts
Gerbil	65 to 75°F; humidity under about 50%	Short bursts around the clock	Keep away from damp rooms and drafts
Fancy Rat	A comfortable room temperature; avoid heat and cold	Dawn, dusk and night active	Solid levels, away from drafts
Fancy Mouse	65 to 75°F	Night active; keep out of bedrooms	Draft-free, with deep nesting material
Chinchilla	60 to 70°F; above 77°F is unsafe; keep humidity low	Dusk and night active	Cool room, dust baths, never wet
Degu	About 65 to 72°F	Active by day and early evening	Dry, well-ventilated room with a dust bath
Ferret	Keep the room below about 80°F	Sleeps 15 to 20 hours; polyphasic	Cool, ferret-proofed room
African Pygmy Hedgehog	72 to 80°F at floor level	Strictly nocturnal	Warm, draft-free space with a reliable heat plan
Sugar Glider	70 to 90°F	Strictly nocturnal, most active 10 p.m. to 4 a.m.	Quiet room; a cage in a bedroom is a bad idea

Nocturnal, crepuscular or daytime? This matters more than most families realize. Strictly nocturnal animals, namely fancy mice, hedgehogs and sugar gliders, are awake and noisy when the house is asleep and tend to sleep through your waking hours. Hamsters, rats and chinchillas are crepuscular or night-active, so they are most lively at dusk and overnight. Rabbits and guinea pigs are crepuscular, with activity in bursts all day. Gerbils and ferrets run on short cycles around the clock. Degus are the exception, active during the day and early evening. **For a child's bedroom, the animals to avoid are the night-active ones: hamsters, mice, rats, chinchillas, hedgehogs and sugar gliders.** A hamster wheel at 2 a.m. is a memorable experience.

Where to put the enclosure. Choose a quiet spot in a living area, away from direct sunlight, vents, drafts, kitchen fumes and loud speakers. Keep the air clean: scented candles, aerosol sprays and smoke are hard on tiny lungs.

SECTION 6

Diet & Nutrition



Hay, pellets and fresh greens for the herbivores; seed mixes or lab blocks for the rodents; a little animal protein for omnivores. The right diet depends entirely on which small animal you choose.

The biggest nutrition mistake in small-animal keeping is believing that "small pet food" is one thing. It is not. The right staple for a rabbit would harm a ferret, a degu cannot eat the treats a rat loves, and a hedgehog is built on a different plan from all of them. Please buy food by species, read the ingredient label and skip the colorful mixes with dried fruit bits and sugary treats. Our own rule: **Clean Fuel, No Junk.**

Diet type	Species	Main staple	Common mistake
Hay-first herbivore	Rabbit, Guinea Pig, Chinchilla, Degu	Unlimited fresh grass hay such as timothy or orchard grass, plus measured plain pellets; fresh leafy greens for rabbits and guinea pigs	Feeding a pellet-and-seed mix instead of hay. Guinea pigs also need a daily source of vitamin C, and degus must avoid sugar completely
Seed and grain eater (omnivorous)	Hamster, Gerbil	A quality seed-and-grain mix (or fortified lab block for hamsters), with a little fresh food and small protein extras	Offering sunflower seeds and treats while leaving the balanced portions behind, and feeding sugary yogurt drops

Diet type	Species	Main staple	Common mistake
Lab-block omnivore	Fancy Rat, Fancy Mouse	A complete pelleted lab block, with small amounts of fresh food	Using a hamster-style seed mix, which lets them pick out the fatty seeds
Obligate carnivore	Ferret	High-protein, high-fat, low-fiber ferret kibble with a named meat as the first ingredient	Feeding fruit, vegetables, grains or sweets; ferrets cannot digest plant carbohydrates
Insectivore	African Pygmy Hedgehog	A measured nightly portion of high-quality kibble, with insects such as black soldier fly larvae several times a week	Overfeeding mealworms and fatty insects, leading to obesity
Omnivore with a specialized diet	Sugar Glider	A balanced staple diet such as the widely used BML recipe, fresh produce and insects	Feeding a fruit-heavy diet with no calcium balance

Hay is not optional. For the hay-first species, hay is not a treat or a bedding; it is the diet. It keeps teeth worn down and the gut moving, and when a rabbit, guinea pig or chinchilla stops eating hay, that is a veterinary concern. Unlimited, fresh, sweet-smelling grass hay should be available at all times. Pellets are a measured supplement. Alfalfa is generally for growing animals, not adults.

Fresh produce. Rabbits and guinea pigs thrive on a daily salad of leafy greens, and guinea pigs benefit from a vitamin C source such as bell pepper every day. Fruit is a tiny occasional treat at most. Rats and mice enjoy small portions of fresh vegetables and plain cooked foods alongside their lab block, as do hamsters and gerbils in small quantities. Never feed chocolate, caffeine, alcohol, avocado, raw beans, onions or garlic to any small animal, and introduce any new food slowly. If you are ever unsure whether something is safe, the ASPCA Animal Poison Control line is (888) 426-4435, and Pet Poison Helpline is (855) 764-7661.

Water. Fresh water must be available at all times. Use a sipper bottle and a heavy ceramic bowl where the species allows, wash daily and check the bottle spout every day. Sipper bottles clog.

Protein for the little omnivores. Hamsters, gerbils, rats, mice and sugar gliders benefit from small amounts of animal protein, such as dried or live insects. A few mealworms are a nice treat; a bowl of them is an obesity plan.

Treats. The best treats are tiny and natural: a pinch of herbs, a safe twig to chew, a single raw piece of vegetable. Skip yogurt drops, honey sticks and anything with sugar. Seed-heavy treats are junk food to most small animals.

One rule for everything. Change diets slowly over a week, and weigh your small animals regularly on a kitchen scale. Weight loss is often the first sign of illness, and small animals hide it well.

Shop the food and supplies: Browse Critter Food Treats & Feed.

SECTION 7

Lifespan & Commitment

A small body does not mean a small commitment. The time you will be responsible for this animal varies from roughly 18 months to nearly two decades.

Lifespan range	Species	What it means for your family
Under 3 years	Fancy Mouse (1.5 to 3), Hamster (about 1.5 to 3.5 depending on type), Fancy Rat (2 to 3)	Brief and intense. Illness can move quickly. Good for a family ready to say goodbye and to explain it kindly to children.
3 to 8 years	Gerbil (3 to 5), Guinea Pig (4 to 8), Hedgehog (4 to 6, sometimes more), Degu (6 to 8)	A school-age span. A child who gets a guinea pig in elementary school will likely still own it in middle school.
5 to 12 years	Ferret (5 to 10), Rabbit (8 to 12)	A dog-length commitment. Plan for moves, college and life changes.
10 years or more	Chinchilla (10 to 20), Sugar Glider (10 to 15)	A true long-term commitment. Not appropriate to buy for a child without a plan for lifelong adult ownership.

Think about the family you will be in a decade. If you might move, travel a lot, have a baby or send a child off to school, think about who will care for the animal. A short-lived animal is not easier; it simply asks you to be emotionally ready sooner.

Plan for the end of life too. Older small animals often develop dental disease, tumors, arthritis and organ problems, and caring for them is part of the commitment. Talk with your vet about quality-of-life decisions, and prepare children gently.

Rehoming is a last resort, not a plan B. If you truly cannot keep an animal, contact a reputable rescue or the place you got it rather than releasing it outdoors or surrendering it carelessly. Never release a pet into the wild. Small pets are not equipped to survive outside, and releasing them can harm native wildlife.

SECTION 8

Handling, Temperament & Families

Almost every small animal is a prey animal. Their instinct is to hide, freeze or flee, and a hand coming from above looks like a hawk. The most important thing we can teach a family is to let the animal choose to come to you.

General rules for any small animal.

- Let a new animal settle for at least a couple of days before handling.
- Sit on the floor and let them approach. Offer an approved treat from your open palm.
- Support the whole body with two hands; never grab by the tail or scruff, and never squeeze.
- Handle at their level, low to the ground, over a soft surface. A fall from a lap can break a small animal's bones.
- Wash your hands before and after handling every time.
- End sessions while the animal is calm, not struggling.
- Watch the animal's body language and respect a clear "no."

Species notes for families. Rabbits and chinchillas are fragile and often dislike being held, so they are an adult's pet first, whatever the age of the child who asked for one. Guinea pigs and rats tolerate gentle, seated handling best and suit responsible children with an adult nearby. Hamsters and mice are fast, nocturnal and may bite when startled. Gerbils are quick and rarely bite but can wriggle free. Degus and ferrets are lively, social and need lots of daily attention and supervision around young children. Hedgehogs and sugar gliders are nocturnal, demanding and not suited to children, and both are illegal as pets in Pennsylvania.

Children and safety. Adults should supervise all handling for young children. After touching any small animal, its food or its bedding, wash hands with soap and water; animals can carry germs, including Salmonella, that affect people. Households with very young children, pregnant members or weakened immune systems should talk with a doctor and a vet before adding any small animal.

Multiple pets in one home. Cats and dogs may view small animals as prey, and ferrets are predators. Keep small animals in a closed room or behind secure barriers, and never rely on trust.

SECTION 9

Legal & Ethical Sourcing

Pennsylvania law. We are a Pennsylvania business, so we say this plainly: **hedgehogs and sugar gliders are illegal as pets in Pennsylvania.** The Pennsylvania Game Commission treats them as exotic wildlife and does not allow them to be kept or sold. House Bill 692, introduced in 2025, would legalize them but has not passed. If you live here, please do not buy one online or from out of state, because keeping one is against the law.

Other places. Ferrets are banned statewide in California and Hawaii and in New York City. For every other species and every other location, rules vary by state, county, city and even homeowners' association or landlord. Please check your state wildlife agency and your local rules before you buy any animal, and get landlord permission in writing if you rent.

Ethical sourcing. Good sourcing is as important as good housing.

- **Consider adoption first.** Shelters and rescues regularly have rabbits, guinea pigs, rats, hamsters, gerbils, and sometimes ferrets, chinchillas and degus. Adopting often includes basic health screening, and an experienced rescue can tell you about each animal's personality. Rescues are also a good place to find already-bonded pairs.
- **If you buy, buy from a responsible source.** Look for a breeder or seller who lets you see the housing, answers questions without hurry, shows healthy parents and animals, and will take the animal back if things do not work out.
- **Choose healthy animals.** Bright eyes, clean coat and nose, normal breathing, active and alert behavior, and clean droppings.
- **Be careful of impulse buys.** Animals sold as live, cheap, "easy" gifts often end up neglected or surrendered. Do not give a live animal as a surprise gift.
- **Never release a pet outdoors.** It is cruel to the animal and harmful to local ecosystems.
- **Ask for sex and age honestly.** For social species, mixed-sex pairs breed fast. Ask a vet or experienced keeper to confirm sex, because mistakes are common in young animals.

SECTION 10

Common Challenges & Solutions

Most small-animal problems come from a short list of mistakes. Here are the ones we see most often across the group. Each of these has fuller detail in the species guides.

The impulse buy

What you see: A child falls in love at the store, the family buys the cage and animal in one trip, and within weeks the novelty fades or the animal turns out to be nocturnal, noisy or a bigger commitment than expected. **Why it happens:** Stores sell animals and starter kits as a package, and the "starter pet" label hides the species' real needs. **What to do:** Wait a week, work through the Quick Start checklist, and visit a rescue or a friend's animal first. **When to ask for help:** If the animal is already home and the family cannot keep it, contact a rescue or the seller before it suffers from neglect.

The outgrown or undersized enclosure

What you see: Bar-chewing, constant pacing, a pile of bedding in one corner, obesity, or sore feet. **Why it happens:** The cage was sold as "complete" but is a fraction of the recommended size, or the animal grew. **What to do:** Replace it with the appropriate-sized home from the Space, Setup & Budget table, and add daily out-of-cage time where the species needs it. **When to ask for help:** If feet are red, raw or swollen, or the animal limps or stops moving freely, see an exotics vet.

The wrong diet from pet-store advice

What you see: Selective feeding on fatty seeds, soft stools or diarrhea, weight gain or loss, sticky or overgrown teeth, or an animal that ignores hay. **Why it happens:** Colorful seed mixes and sweet treats are marketed to every small animal, but each group has a different staple. **What to do:** Switch to the right staple from the Diet & Nutrition table, slowly over a week, and remove treats with sugar. **When to ask for help:** If a rabbit, guinea pig, chinchilla or degu stops eating or pooping for even a few hours, or any animal loses weight, call a vet the same day.

Heat and humidity mistakes

What you see: Panting, drooling, lying stretched out, limp, or unusually sleepy; a damp, musty enclosure. **Why it happens:** Chinchillas, guinea pigs, rabbits and ferrets overheat quickly, and desert animals such as gerbils suffer in humidity. **What to do:** Move the animal to a cooler room, keep a thermometer at cage level, and use air conditioning in summer if you keep a heat-sensitive species. **When to ask for help:** Heat stroke is an emergency. Call a vet immediately.

A lonely social animal

What you see: Dull, withdrawn, over-grooming, bar-chewing, or aggression. **Why it happens:** Guinea pigs, rats, gerbils, degus, female mice and sugar gliders need companions, and rabbits and chinchillas generally do better with one too. **What to do:** Keep these species in same-sex pairs or groups, introduce new companions carefully on neutral ground, and never house a solitary species such as a Syrian hamster or hedgehog with anyone. **When to ask for help:** If introductions turn violent or an animal is wounded, separate them and ask a vet or a rescue that offers bonding help.

Handling stress

What you see: Freezing, hiding, biting, urinating when picked up, struggling, or fur loss in a chinchilla. **Why it happens:** Prey animals read a grabbing hand as an attack, and busy households can overwhelm a shy species. **What to do:** Slow down, let the animal approach, use treats and short quiet sessions, and handle low over a soft surface. **When to ask for help:** If an animal bites repeatedly without cause, or hides all the time and refuses food, ask a vet to rule out pain.

Finding a vet who sees small animals

What you see: A sick animal and a clinic that only treats dogs and cats. **Why it happens:** Small-mammal medicine is a specialty, and many practices do not see these species. **What to do:** Call ahead during the Quick Start stage, ask whether the vet treats your exact species, and find the nearest after-hours option. **When to ask for help:** Do not wait. A small animal that stops eating, breathes with effort, or is lethargic should be seen the same day.

Quietly hidden illness

What you see: Slight changes: less hay eaten, smaller droppings, a hunched posture, rough fur or weight loss. **Why it happens:** Prey animals hide weakness by instinct, so by the time symptoms show, illness is advanced. **What to do:** Look at your animals every day, weigh them regularly on a kitchen scale, and learn what normal looks like. **When to ask for help:** Any change in appetite, droppings, breathing or movement lasting more than a day, or sooner for rabbits, guinea pigs, and the very small species.

Rehoming and surrender

What you see: A family whose circumstances have changed, a pet that does not fit as expected, or an accidental litter. **Why it happens:** Life changes, and some species outlive the plan. **What to do:** Contact a reputable rescue or the original seller. Do not release the animal outdoors, and do not give it away without learning about the new home. **When to ask for help:** As soon as you realize you cannot keep an animal. Waiting leads to neglect.

SECTION 11

Routine Care at a Glance

This schedule works across the group. Pointers to the species guides give exact details for each animal.

How often	What to do
Daily	Refill fresh water and check that the bottle flows
Daily	Offer the species-appropriate staple food and clear away uneaten fresh food; refill hay for hay-first species
Daily	Spot-clean droppings, wet bedding and the litter area
Daily	Look at every animal: eyes, breathing, posture, appetite and droppings
Daily	Check the room temperature at animal level
Daily	Supervised exercise and interaction for rabbits, rats, degus and ferrets; play time for others as the species needs
Weekly	Wash food dishes, water bottles and hides
Weekly	Replace soiled bedding and wash fleece liners where used
Weekly	Weigh each animal on a kitchen scale and record it
Weekly	Check chew items, wheels and toys for damage
Monthly	Deep-clean the enclosure and disinfect with a pet-safe cleaner
Monthly	Check teeth, nails and coat by sight; trim nails where the species needs it
Monthly	Replace worn toys and chew items; refresh the dust bath for chinchillas and degus as directed
Annually	Wellness exam with a vet who sees your species; discuss vaccines, spay or neuter, and any dental checks
Annually	Review the setup: has the animal outgrown the home, and does it still meet the guide's minimums?

SECTION 12

FAQ

What is the best small pet for a child?

There is no single best, because the answer depends on the child's age and on the adult who will do the daily care. Our gentlest starting points are a bonded pair of guinea pigs or a pair of gerbils; both tolerate calm handling and are active at times a family is awake. Rats are wonderful for responsible older children. Rabbits, hamsters, mice and chinchillas are more often a poor fit for young children, because they are fragile, nocturnal or easily frightened. Whichever you choose, an adult must be the true keeper, and handling should be seated, gentle and supervised.

What is the easiest small animal to take care of?

No small animal is truly easy, but a pair of gerbils comes closest for many families: they need a large tank with deep substrate, a simple seed-based diet, and less daily interaction than a rat or a rabbit. Guinea pigs are also manageable, but they need lots of hay, fresh vegetables and a large floor. Rabbits, chinchillas, degus and ferrets are far more demanding, and hedgehogs and sugar gliders are specialist animals. Easy usually means a lower-contact species, and a very lonely one if kept alone, so match your choice to the time you really have.

Which small pets live the longest?

Chinchillas lead the group at roughly 10 to 20 years, with most living around 12 to 15. Sugar gliders can live 10 to 15 years, though they are illegal as pets in Pennsylvania. Rabbits typically live 8 to 12 years, degus 6 to 8, and ferrets 5 to 10. Guinea pigs live 4 to 8 years, gerbils 3 to 5, and hedgehogs 4 to 6. The shortest-lived are rats (2 to 3 years), fancy mice (1.5 to 3) and hamsters, which vary by type. These are ranges, and good care makes a real difference.

Which small animals need to live in pairs?

Guinea pigs, rats, gerbils, degus and sugar gliders must live with companions of their own kind, and female fancy mice are happiest in groups of two to four. Rabbits and chinchillas are also social and usually do best with a compatible partner, though pairing takes care and sometimes help from a rescue. Syrian hamsters and hedgehogs must live alone, and most dwarf hamsters do better alone too. Ferrets can live singly with lots of attention, or with other ferrets. Always keep pairs same-sex, or neutered and spayed where the species guide recommends it, to avoid unwanted litters.

Are rabbits good pets for kids?

Rabbits can be wonderful family pets, but they are not ideal pets for young children. They are fragile prey animals, many dislike being picked up, and a struggling rabbit can injure itself or a child. They also live 8 to 12 years and need a large home base, hours of exercise outside it every day, hay, vegetables and a vet who sees rabbits. A rabbit works well when an adult is the true caretaker, and when children are taught to sit on the floor and let the rabbit come to them.

Is a guinea pig or a hamster better for beginners?

For most families, a pair of guinea pigs is the better beginner choice. Guinea pigs are sturdy, vocal, active at times families are awake and tolerate gentle, seated handling. They do need more space, daily vegetables and plenty of hay. Hamsters are smaller and cheaper to house, but they live alone, are most active at night, can bite if woken, and do best with patient older children or adults. If you want a pet to watch rather than hold, a hamster in a very large, deep setup is a fine choice.

Which small pets do not smell?

Every animal produces some odor, and smell is mostly a matter of housing and cleaning, so cramped cages are always smelly. Gerbils are generally the least odorous because they produce very little urine, while female mice are fairly clean and buck mice

are notably stronger smelling. Ferrets have a natural musky scent that can be managed but not eliminated. Rabbits using a litter pan, hamsters, rats and guinea pigs stay fresh with daily spot cleaning and regular full cleans. A larger enclosure with the right bedding and a clean routine does more than any product.

Which small animals are legal in Pennsylvania?

Hedgehogs and sugar gliders are not legal as pets in Pennsylvania; the Pennsylvania Game Commission treats them as exotic wildlife and does not allow them to be kept or sold. A bill to legalize them has not passed. For the other species in this guide, check the Pennsylvania Game Commission and your local township or city rules, as well as any landlord or association rules, before you buy. If you live outside Pennsylvania, ferrets are banned in California, Hawaii and New York City, and every other state has its own rules.

How much does it cost to keep a small pet?

The animal itself is usually the smallest expense. The real costs are housing of the proper size, hay and food, bedding, enrichment, annual veterinary care and emergency care. Hay-heavy animals such as rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas use a lot of hay, and rabbits and guinea pigs also eat fresh vegetables daily. Rabbits and ferrets may need spay or neuter or vaccinations. Exotic vets generally charge more than a typical visit, and sudden illness can be costly, so set aside an emergency fund before you bring any small animal home.

Can different small animals live together?

No, different species should never share an enclosure. Rabbits can seriously injure or kill a guinea pig, and rabbits commonly carry a bacterium that can cause life-threatening pneumonia in guinea pigs even if the rabbit looks healthy. Hamsters, gerbils, mice and rats have different diets, temperaments and social rules, and some will hurt or eat each other. Ferrets are predators of every other animal on this list. Keep each species in its own home, and keep different species apart even when they are out for exercise unless you are certain it is safe.

Ready to shop? Start with Critters!. 10% of every purchase supports no-kill animal shelters.

SECTION 13

Every Purchase Gives Back

At Walnut Creek Supply, 10% of every purchase supports no-kill animal shelters, before we earn a dime ourselves. When you bring home a rabbit, a guinea pig or a pair of gerbils from us, you are also helping a shelter animal somewhere find a better day. We are a family business in Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. We grow our own food, keep our own animals, and stock only what we would put in front of our own pets: no mystery ingredients, no cheap filler toys, and Clean Fuel, No Junk.

Take your time choosing. Whether you end up with a pair of guinea pigs on the living room floor or a gerbil tunnel system in a big glass tank, we hope this guide helps you give your critter a good home for all of its years. Questions? Call us at (717) 983-8069. We would love to help.

Welcome to the family, from ours to yours.

Walnut Creek Supply — Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania walnutcreeksupply.com