Name: _____ Date: _____

Why Do Hamsters Sleep All Day?

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 980 words

At lunchtime, Kai peeked into the cage and found nothing but a lump of bedding. At midnight, he heard a steady whirring from his bedroom wall. It was his hamster, Toast, running on her wheel. Kai asked his mom the question he had been saving up. "Why does Toast sleep all day and run all night?" His mom smiled. "To answer that properly, you need to meet her wild cousins," she said, "because her habits started out there."

Wild hamsters are usually active only at dusk and during the night. They sleep through the day, tucked in a nest underground. Because they are nocturnal, they have large eyes, and the back of each eye is built to work in dim light. Toast did not choose her schedule. It came with her, like her whiskers. That is why she needs to sleep undisturbed when the sun is up, and why Kai learned not to wake her.

The place hamsters come from is dry, rocky ground and lightly covered slopes. Hamsters are burrow-diggers, and they build nests inside their tunnels. Some even have ear flaps that keep soil out while they dig. Kai's mom had filled Toast's cage with deep bedding for exactly this reason. Within minutes of waking up, Toast usually began to tunnel through it as if she had an important job to do.

Toast did not see well, but in the dark she did not really need to. Hamsters feel the world with their whiskers, which flick back and forth up to thirty times a second. They also have a good sense of smell and good hearing. "That is why we keep her cage away from the TV," said Mom. "Hamsters can hear very high sounds that people cannot, and those sounds can stress them out."

Then there are the famous cheek pouches. A Syrian hamster can carry up to half its own body weight in food, tucked into its cheeks. In the wild, a hamster can travel a long way each night gathering food, and then carry it home to its nest. Even the word hamster comes from a German word that means to hoard. Kai laughed out loud, because Toast really was a champion hoarder.

Because wild hamsters eat seeds, grains, and even insects, Toast's food is a balanced mix, with a few safe vegetables and bits of fruit now and then. Mom scattered the food around the cage instead of piling it in a bowl, so that Toast had to hunt for it the way a wild hamster would. "A hamster who forages is a busy hamster," she said. Some foods, such as rhubarb, can be poisonous, so a grown-up chooses.

Kai wondered if Toast was lonely, and he said so out loud. "No," said Mom. "Syrian hamsters live alone in the wild, each in its own burrow. They are solitary, and they do not need company." Hamsters talk with smells, and the scent of a stranger, even one in another cage,

can be very stressful. Hamsters do not play-fight either, so any fight is serious. That is why Syrian hamsters always live by themselves, and why one cage is plenty.

Toast also needed a steady day. Mom kept the lights in the room going off at about the same time every night. The cage was cleaned in the evening, when Toast was awake, and Mom kept a little of the old clean bedding, because smell matters so much to a hamster. Every few days she picked out the dirty bits, and the deep clean came around once or twice a month, so Toast was never disturbed too often.

Holding Toast was a special event, and it happened only in the evening, when she was awake and alert. Kai put his hand in the cage and waited. Toast sniffed it for as long as she liked. When she climbed on, Kai cupped both hands under her, low over a table, because a hamster's eyesight is poor and a fall from a height can hurt her. Afterward, he washed his hands with soap and water.

Kai learned to spot Toast's good signs, the ones that show a hamster is being a hamster: digging, carrying food to her nest, running on her wheel, and sniffing every corner. A big, solid wheel is safer than a small or wobbly one. Never leaving Toast out of her cage alone is safest of all. Hamsters are clever escape artists, and a hamster who wanders out unwatched might stray or meet a cat or a dog.

There is one hard fact about hamsters. Their bodies work fast, so they can lose strength quickly when they are unwell, and yet they do not show pain. So a hamster can be in trouble before anyone sees it. Kai's mom checked Toast's teeth, her coat, and her eyes once a week. Kai watched for changes in how she ate, moved, and slept, because a change is usually the very first clue that something is wrong.

If Toast ever stopped eating, hid more than usual, or had a wet, messy bottom, Kai knew to tell his mom right away. They would call a vet who knows hamsters well. Kai also knew not to give any medicine himself. Only a vet can say which medicine is safe, because medicines meant for people or other animals can be dangerous to a hamster. And since hamsters can catch colds from people, Kai would tell his mom if he was sick, too.

Kai stopped wondering why Toast sleeps all day. He had figured out that she was simply working a different shift, the same one her wild cousins work, far away on dry, rocky ground. When he wakes up at night now, he listens for the whirring wheel, and he smiles in the dark. Ask a grown-up to look at Peabody Pets with you. You will find it at pet.peabody.kids.

Questions

1. When are wild hamsters usually active?

A. At noon

B. At dusk and night

C. Only in winter

2. What do hamsters carry in their cheek pouches?

A. Water
B. Bedding
C. Food

3. Why does Kai's family wait until evening to clean the cage?

A. Hamsters are awake then, so cleaning does not disturb sleep
B. It wakes Toast in the daytime
C. The cage is dusty in the morning

4. What does solitary mean in this book?

A. Living in a big group
B. Living underground
C. Living alone

5. Why can a hamster be sick before anyone notices?

A. Hamsters do not show pain
B. Hamsters sleep too much
C. Hamsters cannot eat

Words to know

nocturnal: awake at night
burrow: underground tunnel
whiskers: touch hairs
pouches: cheek pockets
solitary: living alone

Answer key: Why Do Hamsters Sleep All Day?

1. B. At dusk and night
2. C. Food
3. A. Hamsters are awake then, so cleaning does not disturb sleep
4. C. Living alone
5. A. Hamsters do not show pain