SOFTWARE & TECH

How To Look After Hermit Crabs

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Introduction: Understanding the Wonderful World of Hermit Crabs

Hermit crabs are fascinating, low-maintenance pets that can bring a surprising amount of personality and activity into your home. Unlike many other small pets, they are not true crabs but rather crustaceans that have evolved to live in borrowed shells. Their unique behavior, from climbing to shell-swapping, makes them endlessly entertaining. However, despite their reputation as “easy” pets, hermit crabs have very specific needs for their environment, diet, and care. Properly looking after hermit crabs requires more than just a glass tank and some sand. This comprehensive guide will walk you through everything you need to know to ensure your hermit crabs thrive, from setting up the perfect habitat to understanding their molting process. Whether you are a first-time owner or looking to improve your care routine, these steps will help you create a healthy, happy home for your shelled companions.

Setting Up the Ideal Hermit Crab Habitat

The foundation of good hermit crab care begins with the enclosure. Most pet store setups are far too small and dry for long-term health. Your hermit crabs need a spacious, humid, and stimulating environment.

Choosing the Right Tank

Glass aquariums are the best housing option. Avoid plastic critter keepers because they do not hold humidity well and are too small. For one or two small hermit crabs, a 10-gallon tank is the absolute minimum, but a 20-gallon long tank is strongly recommended. Larger tanks are easier to maintain stable temperature and humidity, and they allow for more enrichment. **Rule of thumb: at least 5 gallons of space per small hermit crab.**

Substrate: The Foundation of a Healthy Environment

The substrate is not just flooring—it is critical for borrowing and molting (a vulnerable process where crabs shed their exoskeleton). Use play sand or a mixture of play sand and coconut fiber (coir). The substrate must be deep enough for the largest crab to fully bury itself. A depth of at least 6 inches is recommended, and 8-12 inches is even better for larger species. **Never use calcium sand or gravel**—these can harden and trap the crab or damage their gills. Keep the substrate moist but not waterlogged; it should hold its shape when squeezed.

Temperature and Humidity Control

Hermit crabs are tropical creatures. They require a warm, humid environment. Ideal temperatures range from 75°F to 85°F (24°C to 29°C). Humidity should be between 75% and 85%. Use a reliable digital thermometer and hygrometer placed in the middle of the tank. To maintain these levels, you will need:

- A heat mat attached to the side or back of the tank (never the bottom, as it can overheat the substrate).
- A tight-fitting lid to trap humidity—use glass or Plexiglass. Screen lids are poor for humidity retention.
- Misting with dechlorinated water as needed. Most keepers mist once or twice a day.

• Substrate moisture—when you mix the substrate, use dechlorinated marine saltwater or freshwater. The substrate should be “sand castle” consistency.

Essential Decor and Enrichment

Hermit crabs are active and curious. They need things to climb on, hide in, and explore. Good options include:

- Cholla wood, cork bark, and driftwood for climbing
- Fake or safe live plants (avoid toxic plants like pothos if ingested)
- Coconut huts, half-logs, or empty shells for hiding
- A shallow water dish for swimming (freshwater and saltwater dishes required)

Provide plenty of shells (see section below). Arrange decor so there are multiple levels—crabs love to climb.

Water: Two Bowls Are Non-Negotiable

Hermit crabs need both fresh and saltwater to regulate their internal chemistry. Use **dechlorinated**water only. Never use tap water directly—chlorine and chloramines are toxic. You can use a water conditioner for reptiles or fish, or let tap water sit out for 24-48 hours (though this does not remove chloramines). For saltwater, mix a marine salt (like Instant Ocean) with dechlorinated water. Do not use table salt. Provide two shallow bowls that are deep enough for the smaller crabs to climb into safely but not so deep they can drown. Place a sponge or pebbles in each dish to help smaller crabs get out. Change water every 1-2 days and clean the dishes with dechlorinated water only.

Shells: The Constant Quest for a Perfect Home

Hermit crabs will change shells as they grow. Without a proper selection, they may fight over shells, become stressed, or fail to molt successfully. Provide a variety of shells in the proper size. For most pet hermit crabs (Caribbean, Ecuadorian, or other common species), the preferred shell type is **turbinate shells**—round with D-shaped or oval openings. However, they also accept other types like magpie, tapestry, or even some whelk shells. **Always offer several shells per crab**, and ensure they are slightly larger than the current shell opening. Avoid painted shells—the paint can chip and be ingested, and the fumes from the paint can harm the crab. Choose natural, unvarnished shells. Boil new shells in dechlorinated water for 10 minutes to sterilize them before adding to the tank.

Feeding Your Hermit Crabs a Nutritious Diet

Hermit crabs are omnivores and scavengers. A balanced diet is crucial for their health, especially during molting. Commercial pellet food is often not nutritionally complete and can contain preservatives. Instead, offer a varied menu:

Staples

- Unseasoned fresh fruits (mango, papaya, apple, banana, berries)
- Vegetables (dark leafy greens, carrots, sweet potato, zucchini)
- Lean proteins (cooked unseasoned chicken, fish, eggs, bloodworms, krill)
- Nuts and seeds (unsalted, no honey-roasted)
- Calcium sources (cuttlebone, eggshells crushed, oyster shell)

Treats (in moderation)

- Small amounts of organic honey, coconut flakes, or dried seaweed
- Popcorn (plain, air-popped)

Avoid anything with preservatives, salt, sugar, or artificial colors. Also avoid onions, garlic, citrus (some keepers avoid, others allow small amounts), and avocado. Always remove uneaten food after 24 hours to prevent mold.

Use a small dish or place food directly on a flat surface.

Handling and Social Interaction

Hermit crabs are not typically cuddly pets, but gentle handling can be done. Always wash your hands before and after handling—avoid lotions, soaps, or chemicals that can harm them. When picking up a crab, gently scoop from underneath; never pull them from their shell. They may pinch if frightened, so a patient approach is key. Minimize handling during the day, as they are nocturnal. Never handle a hermit crab that is molting or showing signs of distress (like staying buried for long periods). **Respect their need to rest underground.** Proper handling builds trust, but frequent handling can stress them. Keep sessions short (5-10 minutes) and return them to a warm, humid environment promptly.

Understanding Molting: The Critical Life Stage

Molting is the process where a hermit crab sheds its exoskeleton to grow. It is the most vulnerable time. Signs of molting include: lethargy, loss of appetite, excessive digging and burying, and cloudy eyes. During this time, the crab may stay underground for weeks or even months (depending on size and species). **Do not disturb a molting crab**—they need complete darkness and undisturbed substrate. If you accidentally unearth a molting crab, cover it again gently. Keep the tank environment stable; do not alter temperature or humidity. They will reemerge once their new exoskeleton hardens. After molting, they often eat their old exoskeleton for calcium. **Never force a crab out of its shell or dig it up.**

Common Mistakes and Troubleshooting

Even experienced keepers run into issues. Here are common problems and solutions:

Low Humidity

If humidity is below 70%, try covering more of the lid, increasing misting frequency, using a deeper water dish, or adding a wet sponge. Substrate depth also helps retain moisture.

Aggression or Shell Fights

This usually indicates not enough shells, or not the right type. Offer more varied natural shells. Ensure crabs are similar in size. Fight can cause injury; isolate the aggressor temporarily.

Surface Molting

Occasionally a crab molts above ground—this is dangerous. It usually means substrate is too shallow or too dry. If you see a crab with a split exoskeleton, cover it with a plastic cup and do not disturb. Offer extra heat and humidity. Hope for the best.

Stinky Tank

Unclean conditions cause odor. Spot clean daily, remove uneaten food, change water regularly, and do a full substrate change every 6-12 months. Dead crab can cause smell—if one dies, remove it immediately.

Health Concerns to Watch For

Healthy hermit crabs are active, eat well, and have bright eyes and intact antennae. Signs of illness include:

- Lethargy that lasts beyond molting
- Loss of legs or claws that does not regenerate after a molt
- Excessive drooling (foaming at the mouth) – possibly due to toxin exposure
- Swollen or blackened limbs (infection)

- Empty shell with no crab inside (escape or death)

Quarantine any sick crab in a separate hospital tank with shallow water and easy access to food. If you suspect poisoning, flush the tank and replace all substrate. Unfortunately, many health issues in hermit crabs are difficult to treat; prevention through proper habitat and diet is your best medicine.

Bath Time: When and How to Bathe Your Hermit Crab

Bathing is not a routine necessity and can actually be stressful. However, if a crab is extremely dirty or has parasites (rare), a gentle bath can help. Use dechlorinated saltwater at room temperature, shallow enough to cover the crab's legs but not the shell opening. Let it soak for no more than a minute. Never submerge the shell opening—the crab could drown. Pat dry with a soft cloth and return to warm environment. Bathing should be an exception, not a weekly event.

Bonding and Recognizing Personalities

Hermit crabs have distinct personalities. Some are outgoing climbers, others are shy and prefer to dig. Over time, you can learn to recognize each crab by its shell pattern or colored leg bands. To bond, sit near the tank quietly so they become accustomed to your presence. Hand-feed small treats (like a piece of banana) to build trust. Never surprise them or grab them quickly. A happy hermit crab is an active one—exploring, climbing, and sometimes making quiet chirping sounds (which occur when their legs rub together, often when content or during courtship).

Conclusion: The Rewards of Proper Hermit Crab Care

Looking after hermit crabs is a commitment to creating a miniature tropical ecosystem. While it requires more effort than many anticipate, the reward is a lively, interactive pet that can live for over a decade with proper care. By maintaining stable temperature and high humidity, providing deep moist substrate, offering a variety of shells and a balanced diet, and respecting their molting process, you can ensure your hermit crabs not only survive but thrive. Always continue learning—join online communities, read species-specific guides, and observe your crabs daily. With patience and attention to detail, you will become a confident hermit crab keeper, enjoying the unique charm of these ancient, shell-swapping creatures. Remember: a healthy hermit crab is a busy hermit crab. Happy crabbing!

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