

## Tropical Freshwater Fish

### How to care for barbs

Barbs are from the family *Cyprinidae* and come in many shapes and colours. They make an active addition to an aquarium, however, they should be mixed with caution as some species can be aggressive and are notorious fin nippers. They originate mainly from Asia, but due to their popularity most are captive bred for the aquarium trade.



### Water requirements

Barbs are usually undemanding of water chemistry and their suggested parameters are shown below. These parameters are a general guide for this group of fish, so it is important to check with your OATA retailer for any species-specific requirements before purchasing.

Temperature:	Usually between 20-27°C, but some species can live in cooler water
pH:	6.0-7.5
Ammonia:	Zero mg per litre
Nitrite:	Zero mg per litre
Nitrate:	Not to exceed 20 mg per litre above normal tap water levels
General hardness:	Soft-medium (4-12°dH)
Carbonate hardness:	Soft-medium (3-10°dkH)

### Biology

Barbs come in a wide range of sizes, from the small and very popular tiger barb which grow to about 8cm to much larger species such as the tin foil barb which can get to 25cm.

The smaller species can live for several years in a well matured set up with good water quality, however larger species may live for much longer.

Barbs are shoaling fish and should be kept in groups of at least five in the home aquarium, but more is better. Barbs kept singly or in too small groups will often become stressed. Keeping barbs in larger groups also helps to reduce their fin nipping behaviour.

It can be difficult to sex barbs as there may not be obvious differences. During spawning, females are generally larger bodied. Some species may exhibit small differences, for example male tiger barbs might develop a red nose and fed finnage.



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## Aquarium requirements

As a general rule you should, within reason, buy an aquarium as large as possible. Ideally, it should be able to accommodate at least a small group of barbs. Due to their active nature, it is recommended that an aquarium of at least 60 litres for a small group of the smaller (8cm) species and a much larger aquarium (at least 400 litres) for larger species like tin foil barbs. The larger the aquarium, the more stable the environmental conditions such as temperature and water quality will be. Whatever the size, **a filter is always essential**.

The tank should also have aquarium gravel or sand and ideally live plants present to provide cover (but note that some barbs will eat live plants, so check with your OATA retailer). If live plants are not used, then the addition of plastic plants and suitable ornaments is recommended, such as plant pots or model caves, which supplies the fish with shelter. It is especially important to provide swimming space for barbs as they are very active. A lid is also recommended as they may jump from the water occasionally. A fair water flow and extra aeration is recommended when keeping barbs.

Generally, a heater is required to maintain a suitable temperature all year round, however, some species will require slightly cooler temperatures and can be kept in an unheated aquarium. To minimise fluctuations in water temperature, the aquarium should not be situated near any draughts or heat sources. It should also be out of direct sunlight and away from loud noises, vibrations and sudden movements. Overhead tank lighting is recommended to maintain correct day-night cycle.

**Water testing kits are essential** so that water quality can be checked on a regular basis (once a week) to ensure it does not slip below the water requirements stated above.

## Introducing your fish

Before adding any fish, seek advice from your OATA retailer to make sure that your aquarium is an appropriate size for the number of barbs you would like to keep. Check that the water quality in your aquarium is suitable i.e. levels of ammonia and nitrite are zero. Only increase the number of fish you have in your aquarium slowly as the population of beneficial bacteria established when maturing your aquarium filter need to increase every time more fish are added and feeding increases. Overstocking or stocking your aquarium too quickly can result in 'new tank syndrome'. This occurs when there are not enough nitrifying bacteria to cope with the increased waste from the fish, leading to unhealthy levels of ammonia and nitrite, which may cause fish to become ill or die.

Healthy fish have clear bright eyes, undamaged fins, intact scales, no ulcerations or bumps, appropriate swimming behaviour and steady breathing. Do not purchase a seemingly healthy fish if sickly fish are present in the tank with it. Signs of disease can include clamped fins, flicking against gravel or décor and shimmying (shaking).



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Diseases can be easily carried by fish that do not show any clinical signs. If in doubt, ask your OATA retailer for advice as they will have in-depth knowledge and experience.

Your OATA retailer will usually sell your fish to you in a plastic bag. Try not to keep them in this for too long. Once purchased, take your new fish home as quickly as possible because fish are easily stressed by bright lights, extreme temperatures, noise and movement.

Once home, your fish will need to acclimatise to their new environment and a common method of doing this is known as the 'floating bag' method. Switch off the aquarium lights and take the bag containing your new fish out of its outer wrappings carefully, avoiding exposure to bright light. Float the bag in the water of your tank to ensure the temperature in the bag is the same as the aquarium water. After 10 minutes, slowly introduce small amounts of aquarium water into the bag containing the fish for up to 20 minutes. Once complete, carefully release the fish into the aquarium whilst introducing as little bag water into the aquarium as possible. After this, dispose of the bag and any excess water appropriately. Monitor your new fish carefully for the first week, paying particular attention to water quality. If in doubt, contact your OATA retailer for advice.

## Maintenance

At least once every week, a partial water change of 25% is strongly recommended (a siphon device is useful to remove solid waste from the gravel). The water should be tested regularly (at least once per week) to ensure that ammonia and nitrites don't build up. Ensure that the replacement water is treated with tap water conditioner to remove any harmful chlorine or chloramine present before adding to the aquarium.

Filters should be checked for blockages. If the filter needs cleaning, do not run it under the tap because any chlorine or chloramine present may kill the beneficial bacterial population that has established in the media. Instead, it should be rinsed lightly in the tank water which is removed during a partial water change as this reduces the amount of bacteria which are lost.

Good husbandry is essential as barbs can be stressed by even the smallest amounts of ammonia and nitrite which may then cause them to develop various diseases. Test the water to monitor the ammonia, nitrite and nitrate levels, together with pH and water hardness every week, especially during initial set-up and after adding extra fish.

## What to watch out for

All fish will have slight variations in their behaviour or appearance, but keeping an eye on any changes in the following will help to identify any potential problems before they become a real health issue:

- ▶ swimming behaviour – hanging at the surface, sitting on the bottom or erratic swimming



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- colour – turning a darker or paler colour than normal
- temperament – changes in level of aggression or hiding more than normal
- breathing – gill covers moving at a slower or faster rate than normal
- appearance – development of white spots or fluffy growths, loss of fins or scales
- condition – increase or decrease in body weight and condition
- feeding – reduced intake or lack of interest in food

If you are concerned about the health of any of your livestock, then test your water quality and contact your OATA retailer for further guidance.

## Feeding

Most barbs are omnivorous and will take most food types. In the home aquarium, they should be fed with a good quality flake or granule. They will also benefit from being fed live or frozen food such as daphnia, small bloodworm or tubifex for the smaller species and larger items like artemia, bloodworm or chopped items like cockle or mussel for larger barbs. Some species such as the tinfoil barb are predominately vegetarian and will need vegetable matter in their diet.

Barbs should only be fed what they can eat within a few minutes once a day. Take care not to overfeed as this can lead to a build-up of uneaten food which breaks down releasing toxic waste into the water. If in doubt, ask your OATA retailer for advice on appropriate feeding levels.

## Compatibility

Care must be taken when mixing barbs with other species as some barbs can be semi-aggressive and may nip the fins of other fish. These barbs should not be mixed with slow swimming, timid or long finned fish. Also, while not predatory by nature, the larger species should not be mixed with species they might be able to fit in their mouths. Some smaller species, e.g. Cherry barbs, Six-Banded (hexazona) and Checker barbs, can generally be mixed with other peaceful species without any problems.

## Breeding

Barbs can be bred in the home aquarium, although it is unlikely to be very successful, particularly in a community aquarium. Spawning can be induced by feeding lots of frozen or live food and decreasing the temperature to mimic the rainy season. Barbs are egg scatterers and will scatter eggs over plants, leaf litter and in the substrate. Any eggs that aren't eaten by the aquarium inhabitants, or more likely parents, will hatch within a couple of days and after a couple more days, small fry should be seen. For best results, a dedicated set-up and specialist fry foods are required.



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## Checklist

Before purchase make sure:

1. You have the appropriate equipment and position for the aquarium.
2. You have researched all the species in which you are interested and your final choices are all compatible.
3. You are familiar with how to transport and release your fish.
4. You are aware of the daily, weekly and monthly maintenance your aquarium will require.
5. You are prepared to look after your fish properly for the duration of their life.

## Shopping List

- ▶ Glass or acrylic aquarium
- ▶ Filter\*
- ▶ Heater
- ▶ Lighting (required for live plants)\*
- ▶ Gravel or sand
- ▶ Tap water conditioner/dechlorinator
- ▶ Water testing kits (ideally ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, pH and water hardness)
- ▶ Gravel cleaner/siphon cleaning device (recommended)
- ▶ Aquarium decorations and/or live plants
- ▶ Bucket for water changes

\*may be included in branded aquarium sets but can be purchased separately.

## Before purchase make sure:

- ▶ The aquarium is of a suitable size that ideally can accommodate the fish once they are fully grown
- ▶ Water parameters are as advised in this leaflet.
- ▶ Aquarium is cycled and ready to receive fish.

### Always buy...

test kits and regularly check the water for ammonia, nitrite, nitrate and pH. This will allow you to make sure the water in your aquarium is not causing welfare problems for your barbs.

### Maintain...

the water in the aquarium within the accepted parameters highlighted above. You

### Establish a routine...

for testing the water in your aquarium. Record your results to enable you to identify fluctuations quickly. Also check the temperature of the water.

### Always wash your hands...

making sure to rinse off all soap residues, before putting them into your aquarium, or use long sleeved rubber gloves. Wash your



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may need to do regular water changes to achieve this.

hands again afterwards and certainly before eating, drinking or smoking.

### Never siphon by mouth...

A fish tank can harbour bacteria which can be harmful if swallowed. Buy a specially designed aquarium gravel cleaner which can be started or primed without the need to place the siphon in your mouth

## Five Welfare Needs Checklist:

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 states that all pet owners have a legal duty of care to their pets. Anyone who is cruel to an animal or is found not to be providing the five animal welfare needs, as listed below, can be prosecuted.

- ▶ A **suitable environment** e.g. appropriately sized tank (with water heater if tropical set up) within a suitable location in your home.
- ▶ A **suitable diet** which meets the needs of your chosen fish.
- ▶ **Behaviour** - Fish are able to exhibit their normal behaviour e.g. hiding places for timid fish, enough room for fish to swim freely.
- ▶ **Companionship** - Ensure you know whether your chosen fish need to be kept with, or apart from, other fish.
- ▶ **Health** - Protected from pain, injury, suffering & disease e.g. you are aware of the daily, weekly and monthly maintenance that your aquarium will need.

- ▶ **Water quality test kits are a necessity not an optional extra**
- ▶ **You must be prepared to look after your fish properly for the duration of their life and provide an aquarium which can accommodate your fish when fully grown**



\*Never release your aquarium animals or plants into the wild

It is illegal and for most fish species this will lead to an untimely and possibly lingering death. Any animals or plants that do survive might be harmful to our native countryside. Take care to properly dispose of any soiled substrate (e.g. sand or gravel) or decorations so that non-native organisms do not enter natural watercourses.

Visit [ornamentalfish.org](http://ornamentalfish.org) to find a full range of how to guides and species-specific care sheets to help you look after your fish successfully.



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