

CARING FOR PET MICE

GENERAL INFORMATION

Mice have been part of the human environment for around 10,000 years. They originated in the grain producing areas of northern Asia, gradually spreading to all parts of the world. Today's fancy mouse is a direct descendant of the house mouse but comes in white and a variety of whole and mixed colours. Their average life span is 2 – 3 years. Mice are social creatures and it is not kind to keep one mouse in isolation. Two or three females are a practical arrangement, as many male mice will fight after the age of puberty i.e. 6 weeks.



Mice can be visually enchanting creatures and quite comical to watch during their playing activity. A word of warning: it is difficult to eradicate their somewhat musty odour and extreme cleanliness is absolutely essential if the odour is to remain within bounds. Some consider that female mice are less likely to offend than males. Because mice require a higher ambient temperature than rabbits or guinea pigs, they are not suitable for keeping outdoors in winter.

Prepare for your mice before you bring them home. Have ready their cage, food and drink containers, gnawing log, bedding and of course, a food supply. Moving house is traumatic for any pet, but by preparing in advance your mice can move straight into a secure and comfortable environment.

HOUSING

Living quarters should be designed to give the sort of conditions which most closely resemble the animal's natural way of life, with access to tunnels for hiding in and materials like straw and shavings for warmth and nest making.

Toilet roll holders make easily replaceable tunnels.

Small mammals should be housed in cages where they may be viewed from the front, not from the top, as this is less stressful for them. Mice do not need expensive housing, but the following features are important:

- ✓ Hardwood cage with an escape-proof wire mesh front
- ✓ Hinged lid to allow easy access to the mice and to facilitate cleaning
- ✓ A small dark nesting box as a gallery close to the lid of the cage, with a ramp for the mice to reach it. This is important, as mice will suffer great stress if such a retreat is not available.

Alternatively, purpose made cages are available in pet shops. They contain a nesting or sleeping box and living quarters of a type suitable for their welfare, but do make sure the cage is of sufficient size to leave room for the mice and the toys! A suitable cage size for two mice is 60cm x 30cm x 25cm.

CLEANING

Mice generally use one corner for toilet purposes, so clean this daily and replace with clean, dry litter. Cages should be thoroughly washed and disinfected every 3 – 4 weeks and dried before returning the mice to them. Mice cannot tolerate damp conditions so a spare cage is useful at this time. Do not disturb the nest unless necessary as too frequent cleaning of this area can cause stress by disturbing the natural scent that the animal has created in its environment.

BEDDING

Sawdust, peat, woodchips and shavings all provide suitable lining for the cage. Shredded paper is necessary for nesting material. Cotton wool is also appreciated for this purpose. Do not use newspaper, as the print can be poisonous. Renew bedding several times a week to minimise odours and lessen the risk of disease.

EXERCISE

Mice are inquisitive and provision should be made in their cage for exercise toys. Miniature ladders, ropes, Ferris wheels and perhaps a cotton reel, plus a small bark covered log for gnawing, will all serve to provide a stimulating environment. Consider building a multi-storeyed mouse cage to give more opportunity for exercise.

FOOD

Mice thrive on pelleted food (obtainable from pet shops) as a staple ration, with some raw vegetables and fruit, such as carrot, swede, celery and apple for variety. Fresh hay and water are also necessary daily requirements. The water should be given ad lib from drinking bottles, which the mice will quickly learn to drink from. A mouse will normally drink 3 – 7ml per day.

A little canary or parrot seed, wheat, oats, rolled oats or stale wholemeal bread, also pleases them. They sometimes enjoy a little grass and a small dish of milk.

Empty, wash and refill the food and water dishes daily as they can easily become contaminated. Mouse food is best fed in heavy-duty pottery or gnaw-proof containers or by using food hoppers.

Remember to provide your mice with a piece of hardwood to gnaw upon, thus preventing their continually growing teeth from becoming too long.

HANDLING

Mice should be lifted by taking the tail firmly, close to the base, while supporting the body with the other hand.

REPRODUCTION

The female mouse (or 'doe') carries her young for 19 – 21 days, the average litter size being between 6 and 14. The baby mice are helpless when born and it is important that the nest is not disturbed at this time. The youngsters open their eyes 12 – 14 days later. They are weaned around 19 – 21 days and reach puberty at 6 weeks. Female mice come into heat every 4 – 5 days and unless she is separate from the male (or buck) mouse before giving birth she may mate again almost immediately. This means that she will give birth to her second litter shortly after the first litter has been weaned.

The young should be sexed at 5 weeks of age and segregated. Male mice cannot usually be kept together without fighting after the age of puberty and as mixed pairs breed so rapidly you can see how very easy it would be for your mouse family to expand at an enormous rate. Therefore, breeding is not recommended.

HEALTH

Mice do not recover easily if they become ill, so try to prevent illness by maintaining a high standard of care.

- ✓ Changes in temperature can cause respiratory infections such as bronchitis and pneumonia.
- ✓ Intestinal complaints can result from sour food and/or unclean containers.
- ✓ Scratching around the head and ears, cuts, scabs and bald spots are signs of skin mites.
- ✓ Mice groom themselves provided their cage is kept clean, but daily handling helps to keep animals tame and enables a check to be kept on their health

