

CARING FOR PET RATS

The domesticated rat is descended from an albino strain of the brown rat, which arrived in New Zealand in the nineteenth century as a stowaway on European trading ships. Today, there are many varieties of domestic rats to choose from as pets.

For many children, a pet rat is an ideal pet. They do not smell, are not easily damaged, and live only 2 – 2.5 years. Rats are also active and intelligent and may become very tame, appearing to enjoy human companionship. Because of this, they are popular with residents of high-rise accommodation in the United States where it is difficult to have a cat or dog.



PARENTS

It is as well to bear in mind that your children may well become bored with their pets after a few months. You will then become responsible for all their daily needs.

Because rats require a higher ambient temperature than rabbits or guinea pigs, they are not suitable for keeping in outdoor accommodation in winter.

Prepare for your rat(s) before you bring them home. Have ready the 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 you rat(s) can move straight into a secure and comfortable environment.

HANDLING

Rats are very easy to handle and soon become tame, provided they are carefully and gently handled. They will bite if handled too quickly or too roughly. Unless it is very thin, a rat should not be picked up by its tail. Instead, slowly pick it up by cradling or cupping your hands, and then place the animal on a flat surface with a little food. Alternatively, put a hand gently around its chest and lift it onto the palm of the other hand for support. Gently stroke its back. Repeat this every day, as often as you can, and soon you'll have a little friend that trusts you.

SOCIAL GROUPING

Two male or two female rats of the same litter, housed together before puberty, will usually live quite amicably in one large cage. However, a rat that is very friendly and enjoys sufficient human companionship may live singly.

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. 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. Do not get a cage that is too small for its occupants. A minimum size for two adult rats would be 92cm x 46cm x 46cm, but a bigger cage is strongly recommended. It is possible to adapt a rabbit hutch by substituting a smaller gauge of wire so that it is escape-proof. If you decide to build your own cage, it should be designed so as to facilitate easy cleaning. A pullout metal tray on the bottom is one suggestion.

Rats are inquisitive creatures and they like to see out of their cages but, as with mice, they need privacy, too, so some sort of covered shelter and nesting box should be provided within the cage.

EXERCISE

A suitable 'playground' outside the cage, or incorporated as part of it, is beneficial, not only for the rats, but for their owners who will enjoy watching the antics of their pets. Toys, such as plastic tubes, small boxes and an exercise wheel will provide many hours of amusement.

SOMETHING TO GNAW

Rodents require material to gnaw, in order to keep their incisors sharp and worn to the proper length. A small log or a bone should always be available for this purpose; otherwise your pet will soon gnaw its way out of its cage.

BEDDING

Like mice, rats need a lining to their cage, which can be composed of sawdust, peat, wood-shavings or wood-chippings, with a layer of shredded paper on top for nesting. Avoid wood-chippings/shavings from woods that have a high content of volatile oils or preservatives, as these can be poisonous. Shredded paper should be plain white paper or tissues or paper-towels, but never newspaper as the print can be poisonous.

CLEANING

Rats may well pick a corner of the cage for urination and cleaning this daily is a simple matter. Bedding should be changed two or three times a week and cages should be washed and disinfected every three to four weeks. The rats should not be returned to their cages until they are thoroughly dried.

FOOD

The dietary requirements for rats are very similar to those for mice, but of course they eat considerably more. Pelleted food provides good, basic nutrition and is available from most pet shops. Rats may also enjoy oats or wheat, green vegetables, apples and carrots. Generally speaking, an adult rat requires 15-30g of pellets (or equivalent) per day. Always use gnaw-proof containers for food.

WATER

A rat will drink 20 – 45ml of water each day, so it is important that water is available ad lib from drinking bottles. These should be cleaned thoroughly at least once a week with a bottle brush and sterilised occasionally with a sterilising agent such as Milton. Thorough rinsing afterwards is essential to avoid any chance of toxic residues.

REPRODUCTION

Female rats carry their young for 20 – 22 days and give birth to a litter averaging 8 – 11 youngsters. The baby rats weigh approximately 4 – 6g at birth and are born with their eyes closed. These open in approximately 14 – 17 days and the baby rats are weaned at 3 weeks of age, reaching puberty at 9 weeks.

A male and female rat paired together throughout their breeding life could produce a litter every four to five weeks! As the size of an average litter is between 8 and 11, it is obvious that the breeding of pet rats is not recommended.

HEALTH

Prevention is better than cure. Purchase healthy animals and maintain good husbandry by providing adequate ventilation, clean cage conditions and sound diet.

Respiratory diseases – coughs, snuffles or pneumonia are caused by a variety of viruses, bacteria and other organisms. The most common and persistent is chronic respiratory disease. Signs include sneezing, weight loss, runny nose, snuffling and 'chattering'.

If you notice any of the above symptoms, or lumps, hair loss, diarrhoea, excessive water drinking or loss of appetite, consult your Veterinarian.

