

Care of the Pet Rat

Domesticated rats can be low-maintenance, entertaining pets. Rats are clean, friendly, playful, and quiet, and of all the “pocket pets”, they are considered uniquely responsive to their owners.

Through selective breeding, many different color and coat pattern mutations have been developed.

- The average body length of adult rats is 9 to 11 inches (23-28 cm) with an average tail length of 7 to 9 inches (18-23 cm).
- The average body weight for rats is 350 to 450 grams (0.8-1 lb) for a female and 450 to 650 grams (1-1.4 lb) for a male.
- The average life span is 2-3 years.

Diet

A rodent ration containing 12-16% protein and 4-6% fat, either in pellet or block form, is recommended for pet rats. Supplement the diet with small amounts of freshly washed, nutrient-dense fresh fruits such as berries, bananas, papaya, apricot, and raw vegetables such as peas, sweet potato, broccoli, corn-on-the-cob, and dark, leafy greens.

Occasional treats that will be eagerly devoured by your pet can include:

- Sugar-free or low-sugar cereals (e.g. Cheerios[®], General Mills; puffed wheat, rice, or millet cereals, or spoon-size shredded wheat)
- Plain popcorn
- Dry oatmeal
- Whole wheat pasta or bread

Commercially available seed-based diets may also be offered as an occasional treat. If fed as the bulk of the diet, seed diets predispose rats to obesity and nutritional deficiencies. Avoid cheese as it is high in fat and rodents cannot tolerate large amounts of lactose.

Vegetable-based protein, such as lentils, can also be offered as an occasional snack, however avoid animal protein. Although rats enjoy eating meat, a high protein diet has been associated with the development of kidney disease in adult animals.

Make fresh water available in a water bottle, and position the sipper tube low enough to allow your pet easy access. Rats will only drink a fraction of the total bottle volume, but the bottle should be emptied, cleaned and filled with fresh water daily.

Housing

Provide the largest cage possible for your pet rat. Rodents are notorious chewers so cages of stainless steel, durable plastic, or wire are recommended. Avoid cages constructed from wood or soft metal. Cages with a solid plastic base with closely spaced metal bars are ideal for both containment and ventilation purposes. Aquarium tanks do not provide sufficient ventilation and should be avoided.

Provide ample nesting material and deep bedding for burrowing, resting, and to soak up urine. Select clean, absorbent, non-toxic, and odor free bedding. Recycled paper products (i.e. CareFRESH[®], Absorption Corp) or aspen shavings make the best lining materials. There are a number of beddings that should be avoided:

- Cedar shavings contain chemicals that are toxic and can cause irritation.
- Corncob bedding has a tendency to mold and can lead to intestinal obstruction if ingested.
- Sawdust or any pine shavings can cause irritation to the eyes and the respiratory tract.

Also provide shredded paper towels or tissue as nesting material. Avoid the commercially available fluffy cotton wool products as these materials are indigestible and can lead to intestinal obstruction if eaten.

Provide tunnels, exercise wheels, and nest boxes to help maintain the mental well-being of your pet. Offer cardboard tube rolls and wood blocks as chew toys.

Optimal temperature range for rodents falls between 65-78°F (18-26°C), with a relative humidity of 40-70%. Keep the cage out of direct sunlight and away from other heat sources, such as a radiator, or drafts.

Rats are sociable creatures. Adult males should be housed separately unless they are littermates or introduced at a young age. Females or mixed sex pairs do well together. If keeping mixed pairs, have the male neutered, as rats are prolific breeders.

Clean the cage and all cage furniture thoroughly once or twice weekly. Changing the bedding and disinfect all areas of the habitat. Clean food dishes and the water bottle.

Handling

The best way to pick up your pet rat is to place one hand over the back, just behind the head. Gently grasp the rat around the rib cage and lift it upwards. The rat can then be gently cradled against the handler's body, using minimal restraint. Do not pick your rat up by its tail as it can be seriously injured if the tail is not grasped correctly.