

Rats are ancient animals that have been kept as pets for many years. They are highly intelligent, adaptable and social. They are relatively straight forward to look after and become very tame with regular handling, care and respect.

Use this checklist to make sure that a rat is right for you and your family:

- I have the appropriate housing for this pet
- I understand that male and female rats should not be housed together
- I can provide daily supervised time for my rat
- I can commit to taking appropriate care for my rat for its life
- An adult can provide primary care for this pet

Average size: 15cm depending on the type
Life span: Up to 5 years

HOUSING

Rats are very flexible animals and can acclimatise well to normal indoor temperatures. It is important though that your rat's habitat is not in direct sunlight, draughts or places of extreme temperature change.

Your rat's cage should be made of glass, plastic or metal and it must be well ventilated but escape proof. It is best to provide the largest habitat you can afford. Rats like company so don't hide them away in a room on their own.

FEEDING

It is best to feed a high quality rat specific food. This should make up 90% of your rat's diet. Small amounts of fruit and vegetables such as, apples, bananas, peas, broccoli, sprouts and carrots should also be a daily part of the diet.

Treat your rat with such foods as cooked egg, cooked chicken, cooked pasta or packaged rat specific treats. Do not feed chocolate, carbonated drinks, alcohol or caffeine as these can cause serious medical problems.

There are a variety of commercial treats available for your rat, these should not exceed 10% of the total food intake. Treats can provide a fun challenge for your rat; providing enjoyment and simulating their natural behaviour.

Food and water should always be available, and fruits and vegetables not eaten within 24 hours should be discarded. We recommend a solid food bowl to prevent spillage and chewing damage.

Did you know?

Safe chew toys are essential for preventing health problems caused by overgrown teeth.

WATER

Fresh clean water should always be available and changed daily. Rats are known to drink more water than other rodents so it is essential that they always have a fresh supply and a large water bottle.

BEDDING

The bedding in a rat's cage is the material that you place on the bottom of the cage to absorb urine and odours. This needs to be chemical and dust free. The types of bedding material available which are suitable for rats are; aspen or other hardwood bedding and pelleted paper based products. A 4cm deep layer is advised on the base of the cage.

Hay or straw are not recommended as its sharpness can cause damage to a rat's eyes and mouth.

The enclosure should also include:

- ▶ A soft bedding place, such as a small sheepskin bed
- ▶ A hammock or hanging hideaway as rats like to get up off the ground
- ▶ An area / house for hiding where they can retreat to for security, filled with nesting material
- ▶ Play toys such as a tube or a large wheel
- ▶ Climbing tools such as ladders, ropes or spray free branches
- ▶ Shelves or ledges

Different types of small animals, nor male and female rats should be housed together. Rats do like company though being social animals and same sexed rats can be housed together, although males are better introduced when they are both very young. The best company for your rat is you; your time and care will be rewarded with a loyal companion.

HOUSING MAINTENANCE

Remove the wet spots daily and replace the entire bedding once or twice weekly. Clean the entire cage with hot water or a rat safe disinfectant and leave to dry completely before placing the bedding material and your rat back in. Clean the food and water vessels daily in hot water.

NORMAL BEHAVIOUR

Rats are nocturnal animals and tend to be more active at night. You may hear them on their exercise wheels in the small hours. They love to play and hide in objects and are easily startled by loud noises.

Like all rodents their incisor teeth grow continuously and it is essential that they always have plenty of chew sticks available. Overgrown teeth can cause serious health problems and need to be assessed by your veterinarian.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Like all pets rats need to be handled with care. When your rat has your trust and he is comfortable, pick him up using your two cupped hands and make sure that he is not going to slip out. Never pick up a rat by its tail.

When your rat is out of his cage make sure that the area is secure, free of other pets and safe. Rats are natural gnawers and they will chew through everything in their paths including electrical wires!



PLAYING

Rats exercise by playing and they love it. Rat wheels, balls, ladders and rope toys make excellent gymnasiums. Simulate their natural environment and stimulate their minds by hiding treats around the cage and providing lots of toys for them to play on and hide in. Daily time out of their cage with you will also help in the exercise stakes. In the wild, rats are naturally inquisitive and active animals so simulating that level of exercise is important.

TRAINING

The most important aspect of training is to gain your rat's trust. When you first take your rat home; leave him alone for a couple of days and let him get used to his new environment (take care of his bedding, food and water during this time).

Then to get him used to you, start with a soft food (such as yoghurt) on a spoon and reward behaviour such as your rat coming towards you when you put your hand in his cage. Always reward good behaviour with a treat and verbal praise.

The keys to training are:

- ▶ Trust
- ▶ Consistency
- ▶ Repetition
- ▶ Positive reinforcement
- ▶ Patience

A rat's natural intellect will respond well to training and you can teach him such tricks as, coming when called, the word "no", agility course running and article retrieving.

GROOMING

Rats are naturally clean animals and do a great deal of self grooming. They don't require bathing.

HYGIENE

Rats can be potential carriers of infectious diseases and you should always wash your hands before and after handling your rat or its cage contents. Pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems should ask their doctor before considering a rat as a pet.

The signs of a healthy rat are:

- ▶ Active, alert and sociable
- ▶ Healthy fur
- ▶ Clear bright eyes
- ▶ Eats and drinks regularly
- ▶ Communicates by squeaking
- ▶ Walks normally

The signs of an unhealthy rat are:

- ▶ Diarrhoea
- ▶ Overgrown teeth
- ▶ Weight loss
- ▶ Skin lesions
- ▶ Abnormal hair loss
- ▶ Lethargy
- ▶ Eye or nasal discharge
- ▶ Sneezing, coughing or a reddened discharge from the eye area
- ▶ Audible laboured breathing

If you notice any of these signs please contact your veterinarian immediately.

Recommended supplies:

- ▶ Good sized cage
- ▶ High quality food
- ▶ Large water bottle
- ▶ Bedding
- ▶ Wheel / exercise toys
- ▶ Ceramic food bowl
- ▶ Chew toys & treat sticks
- ▶ Hammock
- ▶ Books about care
- ▶ Nesting material.
- ▶ Hiding place / house

