

Rat care

Rats can make great pets; they are intelligent, social (it is recommended to keep at least 2 together) and have a relatively calm nature. Their life span is approximately 2 to 3.5 years.

Housing

- A suitable enclosure for a rat should be as large as possible, easy to clean and **well-ventilated**, such as a plastic-bottomed wire-topped cage. Glass aquarium-type enclosures are not suitable due to poor ventilation. The enclosure should be escape-proof, predator-proof and protected from heat.
- **Paper-based bedding material** is suitable, such as shredded paper, paper towels and recycled paper cat litter. Hammocks and fleece material should also be provided for sleeping. Certain types of wood shavings have been linked to respiratory and skin problems.
- The cage should be cleaned out regularly; the frequency depends on the number of rats and cage size. A complete clean-out at least once weekly or whenever an odour is noted is recommended. Rats are very clean animals, and build-up of waste and ammonia can cause illness (including respiratory infections) and is stressful.
- Enrichment can be provided by offering toilet paper cardboard tubes, cardboard boxes for hiding, wooden toys and more, with food items hidden throughout. This encourages exercise and mental stimulation. Change these items regularly, particularly if they become soiled.

Diet

- Rats are omnivores, which means they eat both plant and animal material. They will often eat just about anything if offered.
- Rats should be fed **good quality rat cubes or rat pellets**. This should be supplemented with a range of vegetables and a small amount of fruit. Examples of suitable vegetables and fruit include Bok choy, other Asian greens, spinach, kale, carrots, corn, celery, broccoli, parsley, basil, berries, banana, apple, citrus fruits.
- Many commercial rat mixes that contain seeds, grains and nuts are not nutritionally balanced; they are high in fat and allow the rats to pick and choose their favourites. This predispose rats to obesity, which increases the development of certain diseases and reduces their life span.
- Treats should be offered in very small amounts. Suitable treats include cooked rice/pasta, cereal and crackers/biscuits.
- Water should be available from a bowl (eg. ceramic bowls) or a sipper bottle. If using a bowl, ensure that it doesn't become soiled. If using a sipper bottle, ensure that it doesn't become blocked or leaks. Change water daily.

Handling and play time

- Time spent outside the enclosure, exploring, interacting and socialising with people should be provided daily, ensuring that the space is escape-proof.
- When picking up and handling your rats, support their complete body, using your hands to scoop them up from underneath. Do not scruff your rat.

Health care

- Newly acquired rats should be checked by a vet. Annual check-ups are recommended thereafter.
- Discuss with your vet the requirements for desexing and parasite control. Due to **high incidence of mammary tumours in female rats**, desexing should be considered.