

# CARING FOR PET RATS

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The domestic rat is a descendent of the wild brown rat *Rattus norvegicus* that has been specifically bred to be a pet. Companion rats come in a variety of coat types, colors, and ear shapes. These rodents make great pets because they are affectionate and intelligent animals that quickly bond to their owners. Rats are also easy to care for and rarely bite. Curious, intelligent, and always up for some fun, rats can also be great pets for kids. However, an adult should always supervise children to ensure that the pet is properly cared for.

## **Feeding Your Pet Rat**

Your rat's main diet should consist of rodent blocks, a pelleted chow specifically formulated to meet his nutritional needs. Choose pellets that have at least 16% protein and 4-5% fat. Because rodent chows already contain the vitamins and minerals your pet needs to stay healthy, additional vitamin supplementation is unnecessary and can be harmful. For most rats, rodent blocks can be left in the cage at all times to be consumed as needed. For rats that are overweight, however, the amount of pellets offered will need to be restricted. For young, recently weaned rats, break the blocks into smaller pieces and moisten them with liquid so that they are easier to chew.

Many owners enjoy offering food treats to their pet rats. Fresh fruits and vegetables make great treats and can constitute up to 10% of your pet's diet. All produce should be washed thoroughly before being offered to your pet. Some examples of nutritious vegetables are dandelion greens, kale, mustard greens, cabbage, carrots, tomatoes, and squash. Fruits that can be fed to rats include apples, pears, peaches, strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, papayas, and mangos. Starchy, sugary foods such as bananas, peas, corn, beans, grapes, and cooked potatoes should be fed sparingly. Dairy products, eggs, and fish can also be offered to rats in small amounts. To prevent spoilage, remove any uneaten produce within three to four hours, and any uneaten meat products within one hour.

Rats love grains, nuts, and seeds. However, these foods should be offered infrequently if at all. While a few seeds as an occasional treat is fine, diets composed exclusively of seeds, nuts, and dried fruits are not nutritionally balanced. If your pet is allowed to eat these treat foods exclusively, it will develop nutritional diseases such as obesity and malnutrition. If you are currently feeding your pet a seed-based diet, a gradual conversion over the course of one to two weeks from this diet to a rodent chow is recommended. Rats may be suspicious of newly introduced foods, so make sure that your pet continues eating when a new diet is offered.

## **Housing Your Pet**

Rats are very social creatures, and prefer to be kept in groups of two or more. They should be maintained in same sex or altered sex groups. Males can do well with other males if they are introduced when they are young. Females, on the other hand, are more accepting of new friends. Spayed and neutered females and males can also be kept together, but do not keep intact males and females together or they will breed prolifically.

Make sure the cage for your rats is made of safe, cleanable, escape-proof material. Wire cages with a solid floor of plastic or metal are preferred, as the wire sides offer good ventilation, and the solid floor provides safe footing. Make sure the cage is large enough to allow for nesting, burrowing, and exercise areas. Housing for a pair of rats should be at least 2' x 2' x 2', but when it comes to cages bigger is always better.

Bedding should be soft and unscented. Suitable bedding materials include shredded newspaper, recycled paper products, or aspen shavings. Pine and cedar shavings should not be used as litter because they can cause respiratory problems. Keep bedding at least an inch deep, and change it at least once or twice a week. It is important to keep the cage clean, as ammonia from urine will otherwise accumulate and cause respiratory and skin problems for your rats.

When you are setting up your rat's cage, don't forget the toys and furniture. Your rats will enjoy having small boxes or flower pots to hide in, and PVC tubes to run through. You can also provide wood branches for them to climb on, and toys for them to play with. As rats' front teeth grow continuously, they'll also need objects to chew on such as unpainted wood, cardboard, and rawhides. If you choose to provide an exercise wheel, make sure it has a solid surface without wire rungs, which can cause injuries.

Rats should have fresh water available at all times, ideally provided via a water bottle or sipper tube. Check your rat's water supply daily to make sure the sipper tube has not become plugged.

## **Medical Care**

Annual or semiannual veterinary examinations are recommended for rats as they are for other pets. But if you think your rat is sick, don't wait until your regularly scheduled visit - seek medical attention immediately. Common signs that something isn't right include sneezing, lethargy, weight loss, dull eyes, diarrhea, difficulty breathing, lumps, and constant scratching. Inactivity or loss of appetite are also clues that your pet isn't feeling well and needs medical attention.

Spaying and neutering your rats is essential for population control in mixed sex populations. But even if you have only same-sex groups, spaying and neutering your rats is a good idea. The incidence of mammary tumors is much less in spayed female rats, and neutered male rats are less aggressive with each other and their owners.