

# RATS

Domesticated rats are intelligent, social animals that enjoy human interactions. Their clean, gentle nature and ease of handling make them wonderful pets. If this is your first rat, it is important to understand that they are *not* just small dogs or cats. They have unique requirements for their care that many new owners are not aware of. Your rat veterinarian will discuss how to properly care for your new pet and keep him or her healthy and happy!

## WHAT DO I FEED MY RAT?

Proper nutrition is one of the most important aspects of your rat's health. Many of the disease conditions we see in rats are due to improper diet. In the wild, rats primarily feed on a mixture of leaves, seeds, roots, fruits, and insects. Pet rats should be fed a formulated *rodent pellet* that contains moderate to high levels of protein. There are numerous seed mixes that are marketed for rats, but these are not recommended. They contain high levels of fat and can lead to obesity, nutritional deficiencies, and medical problems.

*Treats* may be given in limited quantities. Cereal, breads, seeds, cheese, fresh fruits, and vegetables may be given in small amounts. Try to avoid the gas-forming vegetables such as broccoli and cauliflower.

Rats are very prone to *obesity* so it is important to limit seeds and treats. *Grass hays* such as timothy, brome, orchard, or oat are great snacks that will not cause obesity. In addition, hay is fun to burrow and hide in.

Finally *fresh water* provided daily is essential. If using water bottles, make sure the sipper tubes do not become clogged. Remember to wash your dishes and water bottles at least weekly with soap and warm water.

## WHERE SHOULD I KEEP MY RAT?

You should *always* keep your rat in a cage when he or she is not supervised. Cages should be sufficiently large, measuring at least 40 square inches per rat. Wire cages provide more ventilation than solid structures. Rats are great escape artists, so it is important that the plastic or wire of the cage can not be chewed through. The cage floor should be solid and covered in deep bedding and nesting material. Appropriate bedding includes shredded newspaper, recycled newspaper products, shredded tissue, or aspen shavings. Avoid cedar or pine shavings. Place your rat's cage in a quiet area of the house. Avoid direct sunlight and cold drafts. The cage should be cleaned at least weekly.

Rats are natural burrowers and like to explore their environment. Use your imagination to design your rat's toys and cage furniture. Tunnels for play and an exercise wheel are very important. Solid exercise wheels are preferred over wire ones. Provide your rat with an area for hiding or sleeping. Hay and old mittens or socks are fun things to burrow in!

Rats are very social and more than one rat may be housed together. Occasionally, rats can become aggressive to each other and spaying or neutering may help. Rats also enjoy time to socialize with the humans in the household.

*Exercise* is very important and should be allowed daily if possible. Your rat should be supervised at all times when outside of his or her cage. Plastic spheres designed to allow your rat to safely move about the house are recommended, but make sure to avoid stairways and predators.

As with all animals, prevent access to electrical cords, frayed fabric or loose carpet that could be ingested, lead paint, houseplants, pesticides or cleaning products, tobacco and cigarette smoke, and dogs, cats, or other potential predators.

## VETERINARY CARE

Rats do not require any vaccinations, but should have a physical examination performed annually by a veterinarian who is knowledgeable about rats. In older pets, blood work, urinalysis, and x-rays may be recommended.

*Spaying* or *neutering* pet rats is recommended. Spaying females at a young age reduces the risk of mammary cancer. Neutering males reduces the risk of unwanted pregnancy if housing males and females together. It may also help to reduce aggression in some rats.

Respiratory diseases (chronic respiratory disease and pneumonia), mammary cancer, skin diseases, and chronic kidney disease are the most common reasons to visit the veterinarian.

Rats hide signs of illness until they are very sick. It is important to contact your veterinarian *early* if you notice any of these signs:

|                      |                          |                             |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Poor appetite        | Abnormal stools          | Overgrown teeth             |
| Drooling             | Tooth grinding           | Difficulty eating           |
| Lumps                | Dandruff or flaky skin   | Itchiness or hair loss      |
| Change in urination  | Bleeding                 | Difficulty breathing        |
| Sneezing or coughing | Discharge from nose/eyes | Listlessness                |
| Weakness             | Difficulty walking       | Increased water consumption |

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Average life span: 2-3 years
- Rats do not have a gallbladder.
- Rats produce red tears. Excess red tears indicate stress or disease. Owners often mistake this for bleeding.
- Rats are very intelligent and can be trained to do basic tricks!
- Rats are mainly *nocturnal*.