

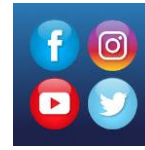


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## Small Rodent Care Rat



Pet rats are extremely clean, intelligent, inquisitive and highly sociable animals. They enjoy human company and the company of other rats and make wonderful pets. Although pet rats belong to the same species as the wild rat, they should not be viewed in the same way. Provided that pet rats have been handled and socialised correctly from birth, you can share your home with them free from worry that they will be aggressive or spread disease.

There are many varieties of rat with different coat and eye colours. These include white, cinnamon, blue and parti- coloured coats with dark or pink eyes. Male rats are called **bucks**, females are **does** and babies are known as **kittens**. Sadly, they only live for around two to three years so make the most of the time you have with them.

Rats **need** company of their own kind, so it's unfair to keep one on its own. To avoid unwanted babies, the best option is usually a pair or group of the same sex. Rats will breed frequently from as early as five weeks old, producing a litter of eight or more young each time. Females can become pregnant again within 24 hours of giving birth.

The best place to buy a rat is from a reputable breeder and a baby should be at least six weeks old. Make sure they have been properly sexed and separated from the opposite sex by the time the males are five weeks old. If you buy from a pet shop, staff should be able to handle the rats confidently and show you how to tell what sex they are.

Make sure all animals in the shop are in clean, good-sized cages with fresh food and water. Blue Cross occasionally takes in pet rats for re-homing – please contact your local centre for details.



## Diet & Exercise



Rats LOVE food! Rats are omnivores and love a varied diet that includes grains, vegetables and a protein source such as dry dog food. Commercial mixes are available from pet shops. While rats are fond of titbits and household scraps, do not let them get too fat. They enjoy occasional pieces of fruit, vegetables, peanuts and sunflower seeds, but these can cause skin problems, so should be a rare treat.

Fresh, clean water must always be available. If a water bottle is used it should be cleaned, refilled and checked daily to ensure it is not blocked or leaking.

Rats are highly intelligent creatures and need LOTS of activities inside and outside of their cage to stimulate their natural behaviours, such as digging, foraging and climbing. They will need at least an hour a day of exercise outside of their cage so before buying a rat, be sure that you can give them enough time for the exercise they need. **It is advised that children are**

**supervised by an adult when handling a pet rat.**

Dig boxes filled with rat friendly coco soil and rat friendly herbs are great fun for rats. You will need to keep the soil wet but you can bury food in the soil and watch your rats have fun making a mess. Shelves in a cage are pee and poop magnets and also encourage laziness in rats. It is best to remove these and fill the cage with scarf holders, ropes, hammocks and tubes to encourage the rats to use their muscles for climbing and grasping. You will need to ensure that you haven't left any areas of the cage bare as the items will work as fall breakers if a clumsy rat should have an accident.

## Housing

The best home for your rats is a wire cage – the larger and taller the better, as rats are active and love to climb. Hamster cages are not big enough. A rat cage should be at least 50cm x 80cm floor space, by 50cm tall with a **minimum of 72cm x 36cm x 44cm per two rats**. The floor should be solid rather than wire, with a solid tray underneath, to avoid a rat trapping and injuring its feet or limbs. Aquarium-style glass cages shouldn't be used because the ventilation isn't good enough. Rats are prey animals so don't like to live in a cage that has wide open space. The cage needs to contain enough items in them so they can hide, climb and crawl when they don't feel safe.



Rats also need a nest box where they can sleep and enjoy a bit of peace and quiet and they also enjoy a hammock hanging in their cage. Rats are susceptible to extreme cold and heat dehydration, both of which can be fatal, so make sure the cage is in a suitable environment away from direct sunlight and draughts.

Cages need to be cleaned out at least once a week, with spot cleans before weekly cleans where needed. The choice of substrate is also important. The right one can take much of the work out of cleaning but can also have health effects, both positive and negative.

Pine and Red Cedar soft wood shavings, which contain phenols, are potentially toxic to rats. Rats can be sensitive to respiratory issues so choosing a substrate that is **dust free**, such as **finacard** or **greenmile** cardboard or recycled dust free paper pellets can reduce the risk of respiratory illnesses. A build-up of ammonia from their urine can also cause respiratory issues so a substrate that is absorbent is also an important consideration.

## Health & Welfare

Check your rat daily for any general signs of ill health, such as loss of appetite or lethargy. One of the most common problems in rats is infectious respiratory disease but this can only be passed from one rat to another – it can't affect other species or humans. Be wary of buying a rat from somewhere with many other rats, particularly if any of them have rapid or noisy breathing. Other respiratory problems are also common in rats.

Red discharge around the eyes or nose is a sign of illness and stress, although the redness is not blood but a natural pigment in the mucus. Some rats develop tumours as they get older – these are more common in females.

While rats can be easily castrated, it is generally only necessary to prevent unwanted breeding or to stop the occasional aggression towards other rats or humans.

Rats are naturally very clean and spend a lot of time grooming themselves, although some may need their tails cleaned occasionally. This should be done gently with mild animal shampoo. If you are worried about any change in your rat's health, consult your vet.

Rat's teeth grow constantly throughout their lives. It's very important that they have something to chew on to keep their teeth nice and trim. You can purchase rat specific wood blocks from pet shops. Overgrown teeth can stop them from eating and drinking and can damage the soft tissue around their mouths which can become infected. If teeth become overgrown it is important that you consult your vet.

## Handling

Rats that are handled correctly soon after they are born will enjoy it. To help them get used to you, try carrying them around the house inside your jumper! **Never** pick up a rat by its tail as this can injure them. Instead, put one hand underneath its chest behind its forelegs, and support the hind legs with your other hand, holding but not squeezing. Children will enjoy handling rats but must be supervised to make sure they do not hold them too tightly.

