

Domestic Rats as Pets

History and Biology: Domestic rats make wonderful pets. They are highly social, intelligent and most enjoy the company of people and other rats. The life span of a rat is variable, but can be from 2 – 3.5 years of age. Today, 51 species of rats are known. It is believed rats were first domesticated in Europe and Asia for a variety of uses.

When considering a pet rat as a first pet, it is important to realize that rats may not be appropriate for children under the age of 10, and some are escape artists due to their curious nature. Adult supervision is always necessary when adopting or purchasing these animals as a child's pet. Rats need daily interaction, and should be handled regularly. Generally, they are easy to handle and do not bite, even when provoked.

Housing:

- Cage size should be a minimum of 20 x 24 inches wide per rat. As some rats like to explore outside of their cage, it is important to make sure the doors are well-secured and no injury can result to the rat from a poorly made cage. It is very easy for necks, fingers and toes to get traumatized in doors, corners and ramps in cages. These should be inspected daily, and care should be taken to be mindful of where the rat is before closing the door of the cage. Very small rats may be able to escape from cages designed for larger animals such as guinea pigs, rabbits or ferrets.
- Use a solid bottom cage with good ventilation. Avoid glass or plexi-glass aquariums as they do not provide enough ventilation.
- Use hardwood shavings, paper pulp or fleece for bedding. Avoid pine, cedar or any clay-based bedding or litter. Whatever is selected, be sure the bedding is as dust free as possible.
- Rats can often be litter box trained. Use paper pelleted litter, and avoid clay-based litter, cedar or pine.
- Provide a wheel and plenty of cardboard toys for exercise and play. Wheels should be constructed with a solid surface, not wire, as toes and fingers can easily get caught while running. Avoid wood chews as these are often too hard and can damage teeth. Some contain toxic dyes as well. Most rats enjoy hammocks and cubes. Minimally, these should be washed weekly, and replaced as needed.
- Most rats prefer to be housed in groups with other rats, as they are generally social animals.

Diet:

- Clean, fresh water should always be available. Using a water bottle with a ball-valve is recommended. The bottles should be cleaned regularly. Brushes are available at most pet stores to clean water bottles. Tap water or filtered water may be used. Well water should be avoided unless it is potable for human consumption.
- A high-quality lab block made for rats should be fed. Seed mixes are not appropriate, and may cause obesity and disease.
- Rats can be fed small amounts of vegetables, fruits, cereals and low fat dairy products. These should never be fed in exclusion of well-balanced lab blocks.
- If on a high-quality diet, rats do not need supplements or salt licks. These may cause an imbalance of certain minerals and nutrients which may lead to health problems.

Spaying and Neutering:

- Most rats enjoy being housed together in groups as they are social creatures. Spaying is recommended to prevent reproduction, and to limit a variety of diseases such as mammary tumors, pituitary tumors and other reproductive disease. The largest health benefits occur when female rats are spayed prior to 6 months of age.
- Neutering males is generally recommended for behavioral reasons, as the health benefits to neutering are less beneficial than those seen by spaying a female.

Veterinary Care:

- Finding a good veterinarian is recommended. Rats should have routine physical exams every 6 months due to their short life span. Manifestation of a health condition is often rapid due to their fast metabolic rates, so early detection is important. Ideally, your rat should have an exam after purchase or adoption, and every 6 months after his or her first exam.
- Rats are susceptible to certain diseases which include: mammary tumors, upper and lower respiratory disease, skin parasites, inner ear infections and heart disease. A qualified veterinarian who sees exotics regularly, can quickly identify these conditions and help with treatment.