

Rats

Rats make great pets because they're intelligent, sociable and affectionate. They're also quiet, clean and fairly easy to care for. There are hundreds of different breeds of rats, but "domestic" or pet rats have been bred for many years and therefore, have different characteristics than wild rats.

HOME SWEET HOME

Your rat needs a cage that is at least 20 inches long by 14 inches wide by 24 inches high. Increase the floor area by one square foot for each additional rat. A wire cage with a raised mesh floor and removable tray provides the best air circulation and is the easiest to keep clean. A glass aquarium with a secure, mesh lid will also work, however, this type of housing needs more frequent cleaning to prevent odor. Be sure to include a "house" for privacy, small wooden ladders for climbing and a thin board so your rat can get off the wire mesh.

Rats are very clean by nature and will appreciate a clean home. Many types of bedding are available. Recycled paper pellets can be hard to find, but are highly soluble and help to maintain a healthy home. Pine bedding also works well and is highly used. Cedar chips are NOT recommended, as they emit a substance called "phenol" which irritates a rat's nasal passages, throat and lungs and can lead to serious illness and organ failure. Corncob bedding is also not recommended, as it is very hard on your rat's feet.

CHOW TIME

Rats have complex vitamin and mineral requirements. Commercial rat food is available at pet supply stores and will provide a nutritionally balanced diet for your rat. Use a sturdy crockery bowl that can't be tipped over and is easy to clean. You can supplement your rat's diet with small pieces of fruit, vegetables and salad greens. Nuts, seeds, hard-boiled eggs, bread and unsweetened cereals make good occasional treats.

Introduce new foods slowly and in small amounts to reduce the risk of diarrhea. A piece of dog biscuit should also be available as it contains protein and minerals and helps wear down your rat's teeth. A salt lick is recommended to prevent mineral deficiencies. Hang it from the side of the cage to prevent contamination from feces and urine. Keep fresh water available in a suspended "licker" water bottle at all times.

HEALTH MATTERS

The average life span of a rat is two to three years. They're sexually mature at about six to eight weeks.

Because your rat's teeth grow continuously, it's essential that you provide it with hard things to gnaw on to prevent its teeth from growing too long. Hard wood, dog biscuits and hard bread crusts are some suggested items.

HANDLING WITH CARE

Approach your rat slowly and be careful not to startle it. Speak softly and let it sniff your hand before you attempt to pick it up. Feeding it a little treat from your fingers will help it trust you and to associate good things with your presence.

Pick your rat up gently, but firmly, enclosing your hand around its whole body, and supporting all four feet. You may also offer your hand and allow it to climb up your arm and on to your shoulders. Never pick your rat up by its tail, because it's painful and could result in serious injury. The more you handle your rat, the friendlier and tamer it will be.

BEHAVIOR BITS

Rats are naturally social animals and don't do very well when isolated. If you don't have a lot of time to spend with your rat, you'll want to consider getting it a companion. Littermates of the same sex tend to get along the best. A neutered male and a female will get along fine, as well.

Rats love to play and are fun to watch. They'll explore everything, so you must always be responsible for their safety. If you "rat-proof" an area in your home, your rat can have free time running and playing with you on the floor. Look around for holes and block them securely to keep your rat from escaping. Rats like to chew and nibble, so protect anything valuable like important documents, electrical wiring and houseplants.

Rats can't be housetrained, but they can learn to ride on your shoulder, understand basic commands and do tricks. Use very small treats to encourage your little friend to come when you call, to reach up and beg and navigate mazes.

If introduced to an exercise wheel when young, your rat will continue to use it. Be sure to use a solid wheel, as your rat's tail could get caught between metal bars and break.

REFERENCES

American Fancy Rat & Mouse Association, 9230 64th Street, Riverside, CA 92509-5924; 626-966-0330 (Louise Stack); <http://www.afрма.org/>.

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