

Brant County SPCA



RATS

GENERAL CARE INFORMATION

General Information

As with any pet, a rat will need care, attention and a commitment to look after it, including veterinary treatment when ill. Although rats are relatively easy to look after, once ill they can deteriorate quickly and proper care will go a long way to ensuring your rat remains happy and healthy. The average lifespan is 2 – 2 1/2 years although they can live longer and up to 3-4 years has been known.

Rats are sociable and will live happily in pairs or groups of single sexes. Rats are best introduced at a young age particularly males. When buying two or more rats to live together it is not necessary to get rats from the same litter but they should be roughly the same age and size and should have been living in a group community when bought. They may squabble a little when first introduced but the squabbling often sounds worse than it actually is and is just their way of establishing who is the boss. They are best left to sort this out unless serious injury or prolonged non-stop fighting occurs.

Housing

The most common type of rat cage has a plastic base and a coated wire top. The wire top can be unclipped from the base making it easy to get the rat out of the cage or to clean the cage. Similar cages with two or more floor levels are also available with ladders, which allow the rat to climb up and down between the different levels. These plastic base, rigid wire top cages are lightweight, durable and relatively cheap. However, you should check the secure ness of any doors on such a cage as one that is opened to easily may be pushed open by the rat.

There are also various makes of cages, which consist of solid compartments and tunnels. These cages are usually designed for smaller rodents and not suitable for rats as the tubes are too small for full-grown rats to climb through and do not provide adequate space for the rat to move around.

Aquariums can also be used to house a rat. These are draught proof and relatively cheap but glass aquariums can be awkward to clean because of their heavy weight. Plastic aquariums however are much easier to clean being lighter but the sides tend to become scratched after time. It is always best to ensure a lid is fixed to an aquarium to prevent the rat from escaping. A wire mesh top is preferable to a solid lid with air holes as this prevents the build up of condensation.

Floor Covering/Bedding

A covering is required for the floor of the cage to provide a comfortable surface for the rat and also to soak up the urine. The most common type of floor covering available is wood shavings – **fine sawdust should be avoided as this can cause irritation to the eyes.** Cedar wood shavings (usually distinguished by a red tint) should not be used as the phenols they contain can cause severe irritations in rats. Pine shavings cause fewer problems than Cedar and kiln dried Pine can be used without problems. Any form of scented shavings should be avoided as these can cause irritation to rats. Wood shavings from hardwoods such as Aspen or small animal litter made from wood pulp (such as Carefresh) are the safest form of floor covering to use.

A rat will appreciate some bedding material with which to build a “nest”. Bedding material can be bought in pet stores but any fluffy cotton wool type bedding should be avoided as this can cause harm if eaten by the rat. Soft paper bedding is best, as this causes no harm if eaten and is easily broken. It is not necessary to buy bedding as this can be provided much cheaper simply by taking undyed and unscented toilet paper or paper towel and tearing it into strips for your rat.

The cage should be cleaned twice weekly by removing the rat from the cage and throwing away all old floor covering, bedding and food. The rat will appreciate it if some of its old bedding is placed in the clean cage along with some fresh bedding.

Housing Accessories

When awake rats can be very lively, therefore many rats will appreciate and exercise wheel. Many of the rat cages available today already have exercise wheels fitted but if the cage you have bought does not then it is also possible to buy freestanding wheels, which can be placed in a cage or aquarium. Any wheel provided should have a solid back and a solid running surface. A rat can slip on a wheel, which has a rung running surface, and if it gets its foot or tail caught between the rungs as the wheel is turning it can injure itself. Wheels, which have open back or front and back with a bar across the diameter can also injure the rat if the rat should stick its head out while running.

Old cardboard tubes or toilet paper roll tubes can be provided for the rat and it will enjoy using it as something to climb through, on or nest in as well as chewing it to pieces.

Wood gnaws are available in pet stores or you can provide your own by supplying the rat with a piece of apple branch. These provide the rat with something on which to gnaw on in order to keep its teeth trim.

The most common “toy” that is available is a Rat Ball in which you can place the rat so that it can run around the house. Many rats seem to enjoy them but not all do and any rat in a ball should still be supervised to avoid accidents. Time in a rat ball should be limited to short periods and if the rat seems at all unhappy it should be removed immediately.

Diet

A food dish is not absolutely vital – a rat will be just as happy to eat its food from the floor and actually sprinkling the food on the floor is more natural for the rat and provides the rat with extra stimulation in foraging for its food. However, using a food dish does enable you to use this as a measure of food you are giving and it is easier to see how much food the rat is eating.

Each rat will have different tastes and not all rats like the same things to eat. However, it is important to know what can and cannot be fed to rats to avoid harming the rat and to help keep the rat healthy. Most pet stores sell mixes specifically designed for rats or small rodents. These usually consist of grains, seeds, pellets, biscuit and dried vegetables. There are also rodent or rat pellets sold in some stores. These are compressed food pellets and although they are designed to meet a rat’s nutritional requirements they do not give the rat any variety. Rodent or rat pellets with some basic rat mix will also provide an adequate main diet.

Food mixes specifically designed for other animals should not be given as these may not be suitable to meet your rat’s dietary requirements and may even harm your rat. Any changes in diet, even changing to a different rat mix, should be made gradually as a sudden change in diet can cause your rat to become ill. Rats should be fed a basic rat mix as the main part of their diet and this can be supplemented with other treats.

Although the rat mix will provide the rat with a good basic diet, rats also enjoy fruit and vegetables. However, it is important that fruit and vegetables should be introduced to a rat’s diet gradually as a sudden large amount of fruit or vegetables can cause diarrhea. To begin with the rat should only be given a small piece of fruit or vegetable one or twice a week and gradually this can be increased to larger amounts every day. If at any time the rat shows signs of diarrhea all feeding of fruit and vegetables should stop until the rat has recovered and then gradually re-introduced into the diet.

Some fruits, vegetables and herbs that are safe to feed a rat are:

- Apple (seedless)
- Banana
- Grapes
- Kiwi
- Broccoli
- Lettuce – small amounts
- Brussel Sprouts – small amounts occasionally
- Mango
- Parsley – a good tonic

- Carrots
- Peas
- Cauliflower leaves and stalks
- Romaine Lettuce
- Cucumber
- Tomato

Other treats that can be fed to your rat include:

- Biscuits
- Boiled Potatoes
- Bread (fresh or stale)
- Breakfast Cereals (low fat)
- Chicken (cooked)
- Cheese (small amounts occasionally as it is fattening)
- Currents
- Dog Biscuits
- Egg (scrambled or boiled)
- Fish (cooked)
- Mealworms
- Meat (cooked)
- Raisins
- Sultanas
- Toast

The overfeeding of treats, which are high in sugar, could lead to your rat becoming obese.

Fruits, vegetables and herbs that should **NOT** be fed include:

- Kidney Beans (raw)
- Onion
- Potato (raw)
- Potato Tops
- Rhubarb (raw)
- Rhubarb leaves
- Tomato leaves

Never feed a rat the following:

- Chocolate
- Garlic
- Onions
- Rabbit Mix (containing antibiotic ingredients)
- Raw Kidney Beans
- Sweets
- Toffee