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Caring for your Rat

Domestic rats are clean, intelligent, enjoy human company and make wonderful pets. Although domestic 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 differing coat and eye colours. These include white, cinnamon, blue and partly-coloured coats with dark or pink eyes. Male rats are called bucks, females are does and babies are known as kittens. Their average lifespan is about two and a half years.

Rats need company of their own kind, so it is 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.

Before buying your new pets, be sure you can give them enough time. Rats need at least an hour's exercise outside the cage every day and, while they make great family pets, should not be looked after or handled by unsupervised young children.

Home comforts

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. The floor should be solid rather than wire, with a solid tray underneath, to avoid trapping and injuring the animals' feet and limbs. Aquarium-style glass cages should not be used, as the ventilation is inadequate. Litter should be placed on the floor to absorb ammonia from droppings. Good quality dust-extracted wood shavings make a good substrate and can be bought from most pet shops. Avoid cedar-scented shavings as these can cause health problems. Paper based cat litter, e.g. Carefresh is also a good substrate and absorbs smell. Litter training your rats will help to keep their cage clean. Your rats also need a nest box where they can sleep and enjoy a bit of peace and quiet. A cardboard box with shredded paper bedding is ideal. They also enjoy a hammock hanging in their cage – this can easily be made from an old towel or similar material. 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.

Food for thought

Rats are omnivores and thrive on 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, you must be careful not to let them become too fat. They enjoy occasional pieces of fruit and vegetables. Peanuts and sunflower seeds are popular treats, but these can cause skin problems, so should be given only occasionally. 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.

Health matters

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 cannot affect other species or humans. Be wary of buying a rat from an environment where there are many other rats, particularly if any of them have rapid or noisy breathing.

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, give us a call.

Exercise and entertainment

Rats need at least an hour's playtime outside the cage every day, but you must first make the room safe and rat-proof! Keep doors and windows closed and block cracks in floorboards, as rats can get through seemingly impassable gaps. Keep house plants out of the way, as some are poisonous. Electric cables should be passed through piping so they cannot be chewed. Rats may enjoy toys such as pieces of plastic drainpipe or cardboard boxes, but avoid wheels with spokes as they can cause serious injury.

Company

Rats naturally live in social groups so it is unfair to keep one alone. A same-sex pair or group will be much happier and two rats cost little more to keep than one.

Getting to know you

Rats handled correctly from soon after birth will enjoy the experience. 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 cause injury. Instead, put one hand underneath its chest behind its forelegs, and support the hindlegs 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.

Don't forget...

- Keep your rats in same-sex pairs or groups.
- Spend at least an hour a day handling your rats and letting them exercise outside their cage, in safe surroundings.
- It is important not to overfeed – a fit rat is healthier and should live longer than a fat rat.
- Rats are one of the cleanest pets you can own.
- Rats do not pose health threats to people or other animals.
- Rats make good companions for children and adults. However, they do need daily social interaction and time out of their cage, so it is important that all members of the family are keen on the idea of keeping rats as pets.
- Rats need larger cages than the smaller rodents but, being larger, they are easier to handle than small rodents.
- As with all children's pets, it is important that an adult is ultimately responsible for ensuring the rats receive the attention and care they require.