



Brook-Falls
Veterinary Hospital
& Exotic Care Inc.



Rat Care Quick Guide

Husbandry & Diet Information

Fast facts about rats

- ❖ Lifespan: average 2-3 years
- ❖ Rats are obligate nasal breathers. This means they breath only through their nose!
- ❖ Iron pigments create a yellow-orange color to their incisors.
- ❖ Rats and mice have a gland located behind their eyes that secretes lipids and a red porphyrin pigment. This gland is called the Harderian gland. Secretions from this gland increases with stress or disease.
- ❖ They are omnivores that usually choose to eat at night.
- ❖ Although rats can live alone, they are colony oriented by nature.

Enclosure

Cage:

There are several different kinds of cages available that are suitable for pet rats. These cages should be made of wire bars and/or thick plastic. The bar gaps should be small enough where they cannot escape between them (usually about ¼ inch). Some cages available are made of thin plastic or glass. Thin plastic is not suitable because rats will be able to chew through it and escape. Glass is not suitable because of the lack of ventilation and the sensitivity of a rat's respiratory system.

The bedding used in the bottom of their enclosure should be relatively dust free, non-toxic, and absorbent. Paper bedding or fleece is recommended. Avoid wood shavings due to the association with respiratory disease.

Adult rats need at least 40 square inches of floor space. Multi-level cages are recommended as they love to climb, jump, and sprint around. Clean cage and all cage accessories at least once weekly with occasional spot cleaning throughout the week. Rats should be provided with a food dish and a water bottle which should be cleaned daily.

Toys/enrichment:

Rats love to burrow. Having a nesting area is essential for enrichment. Some material that can be used for nesting would be paper bedding/shredded paper, toilet paper/paper towels, or fabric. They will pull the material into their huts and hides and make a nest to nap on!

Rats like to find and hide their food. Hiding treats around the cage for them to dig and find is a fun activity that stimulates their brain!

Diet

Rats are omnivores meaning they eat both plants and foods from animal origin. The bulk of the diet should consist of a rodent block or pellet. This should contain a minimum 16% crude protein and 4-5% fat. Some commercial diets available will have seeds and fun-colored pellets mixed in them. These should be avoided as they promote obesity. The rats tend to just pick out the “junk food” pellets and leave the pellets with essential nutrients.

A rat’s appetite and body weight should be monitored closely. Weight and appetite can tell us a lot about the overall health of your pet. If you notice a lack of interest in food or sudden weight loss you should contact your veterinarian.

Water should be provided in bottles with sipper tubes as this keeps them free of contamination. Make sure they are positioned low enough for them to have access to it. Rats will only drink a fraction of the water in the bottle, but it should be emptied and changed daily.

Vaccinations

There are no vaccinations available. But yearly wellness exams are recommended!

Common Diseases of Rats

Respiratory illnesses: Rats are known for getting a bacterial respiratory infection by the name of *Mycoplasma pulmonis* or mycoplasmosis. Since the bacteria is difficult to isolate, presumptive diagnosis is typically made based on the sign and symptoms present. These can include sniffing, sneezing, labored breathing, squinted eyes, red-brown tear staining, and overall rough hair coat. In some cases, the inner ear can be involved causing a head-tilt and neurological symptoms to occur. Inhalant irritants and bacteria can compromise the immune system and lead to mycoplasmosis. This disease runs a chronic course and will likely need long-term medication therapy. It is also extremely contagious to other rats. Contacting your veterinarian when the symptoms first begin can help prevent long-term illness.

Mammary tumors: Mammary gland tissue in a rat covers a very large portion of their body. Mammary tissue can be found anywhere along the shoulder, neck, stomach, sides, or tail base. Because of the amount of tissue present, it makes mammary tumors very common in rats. Spaying rats before 5-7 months of age can dramatically decrease the chance of developing mammary tumors later in life. These tumors can be removed surgically but can usually be well tolerated by the rat, until they become large enough to interfere with movement.