



DOMESTIC RATS

Diet and Care Recommendations

GENERAL INFORMATION

The pet rat was domesticated from the brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*). Rats live an average of 2-3 years, and reach sexual maturity at 2 months. The average litter size is 6-12 young. Rats should be kept in a cage that provides them with plenty of space to move around, climb, nestle, and hide.



DIET

Pellet: Should be provided at all times. We recommend Regal Rat. Parrots (Psittacines) have very similar nutritional requirements to rats, so we recommend some bird pellets as well: Zupreem Fruit or Natural, Harrison's Organic Bird Diet, and Roudybush Bird Pellet. Kaytee Rodent Blocks are also okay.

Seeds and Nuts: DO NOT feed a seed or nut-based diet! Seeds and nuts are high in fat and low in nutrients, causing liver and kidney disease, skin problems, and a lowered immune system.

Fresh Foods: Rats are omnivores and should be offered a variety of fresh foods. Good choices include: dry and cooked pasta, cooked beans, peas, corn (a favorite!), squash, carrots, leafy greens, and breads.

Treats: Avoid foods high in sugar or fat. Rats and mice cannot digest lactose, so avoid dairy products. Good substitutes for foods like cheese and yogurt are soy cheese and soy yogurt. Occasional nuts and meat are okay, but feed only sparingly. Rats do not need a lot of protein, and they get all the protein they need from pellets.

ENVIRONMENT

Cage: Make sure to cover wire bottom cages with cardboard or towels. It is easy for rats to get their feet or legs stuck between the wires, causing injury.

Substrate: Use paper-based bedding, such as Carefresh or Yesterday's News. Don't use cedar or pine shavings. The oils in shavings can cause skin and respiratory irritation, and can also cause changes in liver function. Aspen shavings are okay but not recommended.

Moisture: Provide a water bottle or bowl at all times and change the water daily.

Furniture: Provide at least one nesting box and plenty of nesting material. Rats will chew towels, only use towels you don't care about anymore! Watch for loose strings on towels or blankets. These can become wrapped around the neck or limbs and cause injury.

MEDICAL CARE

Bring rats in once a year for an annual health check. Spaying females decreases the occurrence of mammary and pituitary tumors. Females should be spayed before their first heat if possible. Neutering males can reduce aggression, improve fur, and decrease scent marking.

Common Illnesses:

- a) **Mycoplasmosis:** Caused by the bacteria *Mycoplasma pulmonis*. All rats carry the bacteria naturally, but some rats are susceptible to infections. Symptoms of infection include: sneezing, red discharge from eyes and nose (called porphyrins, which are released when a rat is under stress), wheezing, and congestion. Treatment is with oral antibiotics.
- b) **Cystic Ovaries, Ovarian, or Uterine Cancer:** Females only. Symptoms include: loss of hair, reddish discharge from vagina. Treatment is by spaying.
- c) **Mites:** Symptoms include: hair loss, itching. Diagnosis is by performing a skin cytology. Depending on the type of mite present, treatment is with a bimonthly injection or flea and tick powder.
- d) **Abscesses:** Usually caused by a bite wound, scratch, or tumor. They can develop quickly and become very large, occurring anywhere on the body. Treatment is by draining the abscess, flushing weekly, and giving oral antibiotics.
- e) **Mammary Tumors:** Occur more often in female rats that are not spayed. Surgery is required to remove the tumor. These tumors can occur in male rats as well, but it is more rare.

Bring your rat to a veterinarian right away if it is showing any of the following symptoms:

Loss of appetite
Diarrhea
Rapid or difficulty breathing
Weight loss
Extreme lethargy