



## Rats – feeding, husbandry and veterinary care

Rats are intelligent, inquisitive and make great pets. They are relatively easy to care for however there is some important information about feeding, husbandry and veterinary care new rat owners should understand. This care sheet will highlight these important points and share some handy tips about rat care.

### Basic & Interesting Information:

There are many species of true rats, however, the species most commonly kept as pets is called the brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*). They generally live for an average of 2- 3.5 years however some can live longer. There are many different coat type and colour variations available in Australia.

Rats are prolific breeders. A female rat (doe) has an oestrous cycle of about 4-5 days, and can get pregnant immediately after giving birth. An average rat litter size is between 6-13 babies and the average gestation period of a rat is between 21-23 days. Baby rats (pups) are born in a nest without fur and their eyes closed. Pups will begin to open their eyes at about 12-15 days of age. It is recommended that rat pups be weaned at about 3 weeks of age, as rats can become sexually mature at around 4 weeks of age. If young males are left with their female littermates and mother, unwanted pregnancies can occur and population control can become an issue. It is recommended not to breed rats before they reach maturity, generally at around 2-3 months of age.

### Choosing a healthy Rat:

There are many different places where you can purchase your pet rat in Western Australia including Perth Rat Rescue and Rehab, pet shops and private breeders. Regardless of where you choose to buy your rat from it is important that you give them a thorough examination before purchasing. Rats should have a healthy gleaming coat with no patches of missing fur, clear bright eyes, pink and moist gums, nice clean and even teeth, clean feet without sores, an active and curious disposition and have well formed faeces. It can require some skill to correctly identify the sex of young rats, therefore we recommend buying from someone that has experience in determining the sex of rats. If any problems are identified it may be best to consider having a vet check up before purchasing your pet rat.

### General Keeping Recommendations:

Rats benefit from having another rat as a companion. A same-sexed littermate or same-sexed rat of a similar age makes the ideal companion. There is little difference between males and females as pets, however, it is important to keep in mind that two adult males who are unfamiliar to each other will tend to fight one another if introduced suddenly. Castration of one or both males will usually help stop fighting. Males are also said to have a more notable odour than females however this is not always the case.





Good husbandry is very important with rats, with many diseases being preventable by ensuring that they are kept appropriately. Rats like to chew, therefore any cage used to house a rat must be made of materials impervious to chewing. Cages with multiple levels are beneficial to encourage normal behaviours, sufficient exercise and enrichment.

An absorbent substrate such as shredded paper or recycled paper cat litter is ideal. Rats love a place to hide and a shelter or small toy house should be provided. Nesting materials such as shredded paper and dried grass can be added to the cage so that your pet rat can make their house more comfortable. Small hammocks can also be used. Rats love to play and enrichment can be provided in the form of toys, ladders, safe chewable items and empty boxes.

Ammonia is produced in rat excrement and rats are sensitive to high ammonia levels in the air, which can lead to serious respiratory tract infections. Keeping a cage clean and tidy helps to keep ammonia levels down and avoid potential problems.

Rats are sensitive to the heat and may experience heat exhaustion when temperatures are in excess of 30°C. In some cases heat exhaustion can be very severe and can lead to death. It is important to keep your pet rat cool on hot days, especially if they are living in a warm part of the house. Make sure to provide plenty of cool water, fruit and vegetables on hot days. Frozen water bottles can be provided as a cool object for your rat to lie against on a hot day.

### **What to feed my Rat?**

Rats are omnivores, eating both plant and animal foods. Historically it was thought that a seed based diet would be sufficient for rats, however, it is now known that a seed based diet lacks many nutritional requirements needed to maintain adequate health and can also increase the risk of obesity. As such we do not recommend feeding a diet that includes too many seeds or grains. Fortunately there are many commercial rat pellets and mixes available that are suitable and should be offered to your pet rat at all times. Rats require approximately between 16-27% protein in their diet and good quality commercial rat pellets will have protein levels within this range. Ad lib fresh vegetables and fruits should also be provided.

Other food items such as rat specific treats, bread and pasta should only be offered in limited quantities to avoid gastrointestinal upset. These items can often be used as treats or rewards when training your pet rat. Your rat should also have free access to fresh water at all times, dripper bottles are highly recommended for this.

### **What do I need to take my rat to the vet for?**

Rats require regular veterinary care and check ups. The following is a summary of what we recommend.

Annual check up

We recommend all new rats have a check up to identify any potential problems before they



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are introduced into your home. At this time your rat will receive a thorough examination to help identify any problems that are occurring. After this annual health checks are recommended.

There are no vaccinations available for rats in Australia, and as such, rats do not require annual vaccinations.

### Sterilisation

There are many benefits of sterilisation and it is an important part of preventative health care for your rat. We recommend sterilising your rat around 8-12 weeks of age. Some of the benefits of sterilisation include:

- Reducing the risk of fights occurring if you have more than one rat and decreasing aggression between males
- Prevents unwanted pregnancies
- Eliminates the risk of testicular cancer
- Reduces male odour
- Often improves your rats nature and allows them to bond more closely with you
- Reduces the risk of very common mammary and pituitary cancers

### Summary

Rats make wonderful pets! By following the above advice you can help to reduce the chances of common problems occurring and ensure that your rat is receiving the care that it deserves. Unfortunately even with the best care problems can still occur and if you are at all concerned about your rat please contact us to arrange an appointment. Things to watch out for include but are not limited to the following:

- Lethargy
- Diarrhoea
- Weak hind legs
- Hair loss
- Not eating or not drinking
- Dull eye colour or coat
- Dirty teeth
- Scratching excessively
- Water staining around mouth
- Weight loss
- Discharge from eyes and/or nostrils
- Lump formation
- Abnormal breathing

