



## RATS

Rats can be delightful pets: clean, lively, affectionate and curious. They are as interactive and often as obedient/easy to train as dogs. They usually nap during the day, when most people are at work or school, and are more active in the evenings/at night. They are easy to maintain in a small flat/apartment. They usually live 2-3years and usually weigh 250-450grams.

### HOUSING

Rat cages should have the following features:

- Large enough to allow the rat to get enough exercise/stimulation. Some rats will grow to like mouse wheels but they often need to be shown/trained how to use it
- Be escape proof, yet comfortable
- Be sanitary: have a smooth floor (waterproof and be cleaned easily), or a grill (so the droppings fall through to a removable tray)
- Be well constructed of suitable material
- Made so that the rat can't injure itself or damage the cage

Bedding for the hutch should be of a suitable material such as hay or newspaper. Sawdust/shaving/chips sometimes makes them more likely to get breathing problems and may lead to liver disease. Most bedding can be purchased cheaply at stock feeders. Rats love to burrow – shredded paper or towels make that possible also.

If you have more than one rat, it is not advisable to house them together unless they have been desexed or are of the same sex – if this is the case though, they are very sociable animals and if you are not going to be interacting with your rat much, it is kinder to get him/her a companion or two.

### DIET

A proper diet is crucial in caring for rats – balanced in order to provide all the necessary nutrients but nutrition can also be the key to medical, behavioural or physical disorders:

Commercially available balanced rat (rodent) pellets are a good staple and provide for their need to gnaw on hard food. Fresh treats such as hay, leafy green veggies (cabbage, parsley), carrots but also grains, nuts and fruits (apple, pear, grapes...) etc can also be added to the diet. Avoid very fatty seed like sunflower seeds (high in fat, low in calcium). Also avoid mixed foods with lots of those seeds – they are more palatable and rats will quickly develop a preference for them, picking. They are very prone to obesity which in turn predisposes them to other diseases including cancer.

An important secondary role of feeding is environment enrichment. Rats are very intelligent and active – food can be used as a reward system in training, can be placed in tunnels/mazes or hidden in shredded paper etc for additional stimulation.

Overgrown incisors are common in rats due to jaw mal-alignment (the teeth do not rub on one another as the jaw is asymmetrical, so the upper and lower teeth are not aligned). This can be adjusted by shaving the teeth down or extracting them under anaesthetic but good hard foods can help also: dried corn cobs, dried meat, hard-shelled nuts, non-treated wood...

Correct meals may also be essential if and when rats need medication. A good trick is to use wholemeal bread balls coated in peanut, banana and oat paste:

Mix 2 tablespoons of rolled oats, a sprinkle of sugar and wheatgerm, some peanut butter to make it crumbly, store in fridge. Mash up some fresh banana to make a paste. Roll up a ball of soft wholemeal bread, inject it with medication (use just a syringe, not a needle) and coat it with the paste mixture. Rattie should eat it up readily!

Fresh water is an important part of their diet and must be made available at all times. Drinking dispenser bottles are the best way to give rats water, so that the water doesn't go stale and get contaminated. These are available from pet shops/ stock feeders.

## TRAINING

It is possible to train a rat into using a cat litter tray or a specific area of newspaper etc for toileting, and is generally quite easy to do. Place some of the rat's droppings in a litter tray of cat litter, shavings or newspaper (make sure the tray is shallow enough to allow rattie to easily climb into it). Put their food and water in another away from the tray, as they may not want to toilet near their food. When cleaning the tray, put back a few of the droppings. Whenever he/she goes to the toilet there, say a simple code word like 'now' or 'toilet' or 'pee' in and encouraging turn and reward them for doing it. After they regularly use it, try taking rattie out of the cage to interact/play in another room/area for a short period. Then return him/her and give some food, where it will probably then use the tray – say the key word at the same time. Once rattie is well litter-trained, or even voice-trained (they may learn to go to the toilet on command almost), play sessions can last a lot longer. They can usually go a few hours without defaecating, a little less without urinating, especially if they get excited/stressed.

Hint: at this stage, it is probably better to feed rattie *before* letting them around the house, as they are less likely to chew on household items when they have a full tummy.

You can train them to come when their name is called by rattling tasty treats in a plastic container when calling their name. Use treats such as sweet breakfast cereal, raisins or fresh vegetables. These treats can also be used for any other training, such as teaching them to be calm when picked up. Also give a treat when they are put back in their housing area/ cage, so they feel at ease.

## DESEXING

Here are some advantages to desexing your rat (usually the male):

- They make better companions. Removal of the hormone influences calms down urges to be aggressive or destructive, although usually males are calmer natured than females. They are easier to litter train. Most of all they don't smell as strongly.
- They can have other rat companions if they have been desexed.
- They will not have unwanted litters. It can be extremely difficult to find good homes for the multitudes of baby rats that can be the result of entire males and females being housed together.
- They will live healthier, longer lives. Diseases of the reproductive tracts are eliminated, and males don't fight as much...

## BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS

### • CHEWING ON INNAPPROPRIATE OBJECTS

Wires, television remote controls, books, carpet and clothing are among many of the household objects that rats find appealing. Electrical wires are of special concern because of the possibility of fire and the potential of injury or electrocution of the rat.

You can teach rats a simple word like 'no' or 'swap' and try offering something better to chew, like a carrot, a piece of broccoli, or an acceptable toy (junk mail, empty paper towel rolls, cat toys, or small stuffed toys), or returning the rat to its cage for a rest period so as to interrupt the unwanted behaviour. The easiest way of dealing with inappropriate chewing behaviour is to close the door to certain rooms and to rat-proof the other rooms. Valuable items should be placed well out of reach. Blankets can cover tantalising furniture, plexiglass can be used to cover portions of walls, furniture can be arranged to cover electrical wires or they can be covered with flexible tubing. It is probably a good idea to declare a study/computer room off limits to your rat.

### • INAPPROPRIATE ELIMINATION

Rats can quite easily be trained to go to the toilet in specific areas or even on vocal command, as long as they are trained from an early age. A bit like with puppies, 'positive reinforcement' (rewarding for doing the right thing) works better than 'negative reinforcement' (punishing for doing the wrong thing)

Any questions still unanswered? Please contact us on 08 9300 2322