

## Rat

Are you considering a rat as a companion? Here is some information to get you started.

Domestic rats are medium-maintenance pets. After initial startup costs, expect to spend approximately \$300-400 each year for a single, healthy rat. The average lifespan for a domestic rat is 2-3 years. Rats are very social and intelligent creatures and need the opportunity to socialize and explore outside of their cage for at least 2 hours every day. Lastly, their diet and housing require daily maintenance. Follow these guidelines for basic rat husbandry to ensure your pet is a happy and healthy member of your family!



### Basic Care

#### Housing

Minimum recommended cage size is 23”L x 18”W x 24”H which provides room for running, climbing multiple levels, foraging, hiding, and a litter box. To keep your rat happy and healthy, provide environmental enrichments, such as hammocks, tunnels, toys, and things to chew. Every rat has a different personality and a different way of playing, so experiment with different toys and activities in and outside of the cage!

#### Food & Water

Rats are omnivores and naturally hoard their food in several hiding spots in a cage. A healthy diet consists of:

- Rodent Block/Pellets: this is their dietary staple. Avoid pellet/seed blends.
- Fresh fruits and veggies: 2-3 teaspoons daily. Serve a variety!
- Treats: Nuts and produce that is high in sugars can be served as treats occasionally.
- Avoid dairy and meats. Common toxic foods include coffee, chocolate, potatoes, green beans, avocados, blue cheese, red cabbage, green bananas, brussel sprouts, artichokes, rhubarb, soda, and orange juice.

**Water:** Use either a bowl or water bottle and provide fresh water daily. Be sure to monitor your pet’s water consumption. Water bowls are much more common, and we recommend – them being easier for your pet to use and easier for you to clean regularly.

## **Bedding & Litter**

It is best to use cardboard, towels, or blankets (with no loose threads). You can also use aspen wood shavings, recycled newspaper beddings, wood stove pellets, pine or wheat-based kitty litter, or hemp bedding. Never use pine or cedar shavings, corn cob bedding, regular newspaper, or clay/clumping kitty litter, as these products can be toxic to rats.

## **Litter Training**

If started at a young age, rats can be successfully litter trained. Start by putting a litter box in the corner of the rat's cage that he/she is naturally using as a toilet. Provide a different type of bedding in the litter box from the rest of the cage.

## **Grooming**

Rats clean themselves naturally so baths should generally be avoided. They may require nail trimmings every 2-3 months.

## **House-proofing**

Rats do not have the ability to throw up, so anything they ingest must pass through their entire system. Be sure to provide your rat with safe food and toys and keep them away from potential hazards such as wires and cords around the house.

## **Allergies?**

Some people are allergic to the bedding rats use. Rats themselves are also a common cause of allergies in people, and allergies may develop over time. Chances of developing an allergy can be minimized by always washing your hands after handling your rat. If you think you might be affected, spend some time around these products before adopting them.

## **Health Care**

### **Veterinary Care**

Veterinary costs are not generally high, but some procedures can be more expensive than for cats and dogs because rats are considered an exotic species. They must be treated by a qualified small/domestic veterinarian. While rats do not require vaccinations, they should see the vet yearly for a check-up or whenever a health concern arises. Prior to adopting: Find a rat-savvy veterinarian in your area and inquire about their rates for check-ups and other common procedures.

### **Spay/Neuter**

Along with controlling pet populations, spaying or neutering your rat has benefits:

- Females: Reduces the chances of developing tumours from 70% to 4%.
- Males: Reduces aggressive behaviour by 85% and urine-marking by 80%.

## **Common Medical Concerns**

Since rats are prey animals, they tend to hide their illnesses to avoid being left behind by their group. Therefore, if you notice any change in behaviour, consult your veterinarian immediately. Respiratory infections are quite common in rats and require treatment at the onset of illness. Early signs include sneezing, wheezing sounds, and more severe symptoms, including changes in behaviour and appetite.

## **Rat Behaviour**

### **Psychology**

Since rats are prey animals, they are at the bottom of the food chain: everything can eat them and they never feel safe. This dramatically shapes the way they see the world. Rats need to feel safe and secure, have spots for hiding, and are most comfortable with all 4 feet planted safely on the ground.

### **Bonding with your Rat**

Be gentle when interacting with your pet rat: this will build the trust necessary for a happy relationship. Rats are very curious by nature. It is important to enrich this aspect of their lives as much as possible by providing a plethora of activities and toys to keep them stimulated. Rats are very social and need daily interaction to be happy. The most important thing to keep your pet happy and healthy is to spend time with him/her every day. Like with people, rats' personalities can vary; some can be shy or outgoing, placid or playful. Treat your rat accordingly: for instance, shy rats will need more socialization to feel comfortable around people.

### **One or Two?**

Rats are naturally social animals and can form very strong bonds with each other, so housing two rats of the same sex (unless spayed/neutered) together is an option to consider. Once bonds are formed, they should not be broken. Separated rats can develop depression, so if one passes away, you can try to re-bond it immediately with a new rat. If you would like to try to bond two unfamiliar rats, consult one of the many resources available first. Bonding unfamiliar rats can be tricky and must be approached with caution.

### **Handling**

Although delicate, rats have a relatively compact body design and are generally easy to handle. When picking up, try to use both hands and support the rat's whole body securely. Dropping a rat can cause serious injury, so if a rat is struggling, put it down.

### **Origins**

Fancy Rats are the descendants of the wild Brown Rat, or Norwegian Rat, *Rattus norvegicus*. Thought to have originated in China, brown rats quickly spread across the world to every continent (except Antarctica) with the genesis of sea travel. They were first domesticated in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe when rat-catchers began breeding odd colour variations so that their rats could be easily differentiated when

they were used for baiting in blood sport. However, it was not until 1901 when a woman named Mary Douglas asked permission to enter her hooded rat in the National Mouse Club's Aylesbury Town Show, and ended up winning "best in show," that rats began to be a recognized and accepted pet.

### **Understanding Rat Behaviour and Vocalizations**

- Grinding teeth: Known as "chattering" or "bruxing." Rats' teeth are constantly growing, and grinding their teeth together helps keep them trim. Depending on the situation, this can also be a sign of stress, or relaxation, similar to a cat's purr. It is often accompanied by eye bugging: the bulging in and out of the eyes.
- Chirping or Squeaking: A protest against something you or another rat is doing; a sign of stress.
- Nipping: It might be a warning to you, or testing your finger to see if it's food.
- Biting: Angry! The rat is very upset by or afraid of something you are doing.
- Swaying: Since rats have poor vision, they sway to gain different visual perspectives.
- Eliminating when handled: called "fear pooping," rats can poo or pee when frightened.
- Dribbling urine: scent marking; either an aid to navigation or signal to other rats.
- Wrestling: Play fighting with other rats - a fun way to learn new behaviours.