

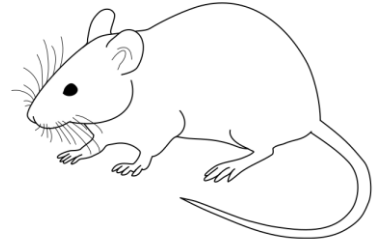


Zoo, Avian, Aquatic and Unusual Pets
Veterinary Consultancy

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Caring for your rat



Your rat:

Domestic rats (*Rattus norvegicus*) are highly intelligent, sociable and affectionate rodents making them very popular pets. Rats can make strong bonds with their owners and have even been known to give high-fives!

There are many varieties of rat with different eye colours, coat colours, patterns and breeds available.

Rats can live between 2 - 4 years and with the correct care some rats have been reported to live even longer!

Here are some following tips to help you care for your rat and give them the best life possible.

Rat accommodation:

Cage size:

Rats are extremely active and should live in pairs or groups so require a large space in which to be able to exhibit their normal behaviours. The cage should also consist of multiple levels to allow for variation and exploring behaviours.

The minimum cage size for a pair of rats is constantly being evaluated with many studies on the effect of cage size in rats being carried out, mainly on rats in laboratory settings. Research has concluded that the larger the space the less stress is caused to the rat. The UK Code of practice for rodents recommends a minimum enclosure size of 800cm² for one large adult rat in a laboratory setting (Home Office, 2014).

Blue cross charity recommends a minimum of actual living space for rats as 90cm (L) x 60cm (D) x 120cm (H) for two to five rats, not including stands' (Blue Cross, 2023).

Alternatively, you can check the size of your cage by inputting details into the rat cage calculator. Although this is a good resource and looks to have similar recommendations to other sources it is unclear where the evidence for their size



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requirements has been sourced. However, it can be used as a good guideline to ensure you are providing the right space for your rat to thrive. The larger the space you can provide, the better for your rats health and welfare.

Rat cage calculator: [Rat Cage Calculator: How Many Rats Can Live In a Cage | Animallama](#)

Along with the correct space requirements it is important to factor in the space between the cage bars. If buying a cage suitable for a chinchilla or ferret you may find the bar spacings are large enough to allow your rat to escape. Recommended bar spacings are 1-1.5cm to prevent break outs.

We do not recommend using glass tanks as enclosures as they do not allow for enough ventilation and rats will quickly succumb to respiratory difficulties and infections.

We do not recommend using wooden cages as these are not easy to clean, leading to infections but more importantly rats love to chew and will easily make a hole in a wooden enclosure.

Blue Cross, 2023. *Caring for your pet rat*. Available at: [Caring for Your Pet Rat | Advice & Guidance | Blue Cross](#) (Accessed 01.09.2023)

Home Office, 2014. *Policy Paper: Code of Practice for the housing and care of animals bred, supplied or used for scientific purposes*. Available at: [Code of practice for the housing and care of animals bred, supplied or used for scientific purposes - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) (Accessed 01.09.2023)

Cage design:

Digging:

Rats enjoy digging, so if possible fill the bottom of the cage with plenty of substrate in which they can fully submerge themselves. If this is not possible provide plenty of digging boxes around the enclosure.

Suitable substrate include non-toxic wood chips or paper based bedding. Do not use cedar or pine wood chips as these can be toxic.

Climbing:



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As mentioned previously plenty of height in the cage should be provided to allow for climbing. The use of specially made ladders, ropes and fruit tree branches can all help with this. Hammocks are also popular to use as places for your rat to climb into to rest or take their food to eat.

Running:

Rats love to be active and as well as having time out of the cage running all over you they should be provided with a flying saucer style wheel. The “Flying saucer” exercise wheels are preferable over “regular” exercise wheels to minimize the risk of back and limb problems. The larger “flying saucer” wheels do not force your rat into an abnormal hyperextended back position. Any wheel provided should be solid to prevent the inadvertent damaging or fracturing of a hind leg or tail if it gets pushed between the wire slats.

Running balls, similar to ‘Hamster balls’ can be bought for rats but these are not recommended as they can be dangerous and cause undue stress. The following are reasons as to why we do not recommend a ball as an exercise activity:

- Rats rely heavily on their sense of touch, smell and hearing to get around and become stressed when they cannot use them effectively when in the ball.
- They have no access to their food and water which can be very stressful to them.
- The constant running in this way (similar to an upright wheel that is too small) can cause damage to their back.
- A ball has very poor ventilation and often rats will defecate or urinate in the ball due to stress.

It is much better for your rat to be handled gently by you daily and placed into a playpen for you to interact with each other than to use an exercise ball. This way you can also check your rat’s health and spot any problems early.

Enrichment:

As well as providing the above for your rat you can also try hiding food around your rats enclosure, within tubes and various hides. This allows your hamster to exhibit normal foraging behaviour. Ditch the bowl unless you need to monitor your rat’s food intake for health reasons.

Rat’s have continuously growing teeth so you must provide them with suitable gnawing material to keep them down. Suitable chews can be made from untreated *wood, sisal string, cardboard and paper.*



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Provide nest boxes with suitable bedding as a place for your rat to get some rest and sleep. A cardboard box can be suitable for this but be sure to change it regularly to keep it clean.

Ensure to provide plenty of rat-friendly toys for your rats to play with and change these regularly to keep your rats interested and mentally stimulated. These can also consist of old toilet paper rolls, eggboxes and plant pots.

Litter training:

Rats can be litter trained using safe dust free litter. Ensure the litter used is different from the substrate used in the rest of the cage or nest boxes so that rats know the difference. When you know your rats favourite place to go to the toilet place the litter you have chosen to use in that spot. Your rat will become used to going in that area and using the litter for the toilet. This will make it easier for you to 'spot' clean the cage. Remember that although they may be 'litter trained' your rat may still go in other areas of the cage from time to time, so a full clean out at least once a week should be carried out.

Where to place your rat cage:

Rats ideal temperature environment is between 10-25°. Try to ensure temperatures do not fluctuate rapidly as this can cause respiratory problems. Place your rat cage in a room that does not get too warm. You should also ensure it is not too busy an area but also not too quiet. This ensures that your rat can rest but is able to interact with you when active. Also ensure the cage is in a draft free area.

Cage mates:

Rats are highly sociable and should be in a pair as a minimum. This can be same sex pairs (males that have been reared together often continue to do well). If opposite sex pairs will live together ensure to get them neutered, unless you plan on breeding. Neutering is a procedure we can offer with Origin Vets. Please get in touch with us if you would like to discuss this.

Rats that are house alone often become stressed and will succumb to illness. Although we may substitute ourselves as a companion we will never be able to communicate or mimic rat behaviour and so no matter how much we interact with our rat we will never be a suitable companion compared to another rat.



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If your rat ever requires a vet visit we recommended their friends come along for the ride to help reduce stress and any smells from the vets will be on all the rats, reducing the potential for fighting when a rat is re-introduced to the cage.

If a rat loses their partner a soft toy with the previous rats smell on can be used to temporarily comfort your rat whilst a friend is found.

Handling your rat:

Allow your rat to become used to your hand and smell before attempting to pick them up. Do this frequently over a few days. You may even find that they will hop up onto your outstretched hand if given enough time.

When picking them up for the first few times you can dim the lights and reduce any noise to help them feel calmer. Cup one hand under your rats chest so that they can grip onto your hand and feel secure. Use your other hand to support underneath your rats hindlimbs. Hold tightly but do not squeeze. Do not fully enclose your rat into your hands as they will feel trapped and may become stressed.

Rats can be very quick so it is advisable to have a play pen close by in which to place them into so that they can not escape and get lost should they jump out of your hands.

Diet:

Rats are omnivores and should be fed a mix of pelleted food, occasional fruit, daily vegetables and an occasional protein source. Always give your rat a variety for them to gain different health benefits and to add enrichment to their day.

Suitable rat nuggets/pellets can be feed alongside fresh food. The pellets should be given over the seed or grain mixes that are available as they prevent your rat from picking out just what they want ie. just eating the fatty sunflower seeds and becoming fussy eaters and obese.

Seed and nuts such as sunflowers and peanuts can be given as treats or training aids but feeding too many will lead to obesity and health concerns.

The amount of pellets to feed one rat will be provided on your chosen food packaging, please check this. As a rough guide this is usually between 15-25g per day and will vary according to weight. Adding small amounts of vegetables daily to this.

Below are a few examples of safe foods that can be given:

Fruits (offered moderately):



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- Apples
- Dried bananas
- Blueberries
- Cranberries
- Cucumber
- Peach
- Pear
- Raspberries
- Strawberries
- Tomato (No leaves or stems)
- DO NOT feed Citrus Fruits or raisins.

Vegetables/Plants (Offered daily)

- Basil
- Broccoli
- Cabbage
- Carrot
- Cauliflower
- Dandelion
- Pepper
- Pumpkin
- Sweet potato (cooked)
- DO NOT feed rhubarb or lettuces.

Proteins (occasional treats)

- Boiled egg
- Chickpeas
- Cooked meats: chicken, turkey, salmon (not processed, packaged or smoked meat)
- Crickets (Care as live feed can get away from your rat)
- Lentils
- Mealworms (Care as live feed can get away from your rat)
- Nuts: Almonds, peanuts, walnuts (as treats due to obesity risk)
- Seeds: Sesame and sunflower (as treats due to obesity risk)

Do **NOT** feed blue cheeses, uncooked potatoes or uncooked meats.

Water should be provided in a drip bottle that does not leak. Check it daily to ensure it is not dripping and getting your rats enclosures wet. Rats should be kept nice and dry to prevent any health issues.



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Medical conditions:

It should be noted that during times of stress or pain rats will produce red pigmentation called porphyrin. This is a normal secretion produced by the tear glands and when a rat is not grooming this pigment can build up. It can be alarming to see as it looks like 'red' tears and initially can have an owner concerned there is an eye problem. Although this may not be the case the fact that porphyrin is being seen indicates there may be an underlying health concern and so a vet appointment should be made.

Commonly seen conditions include:

- Abscesses - from an infected scratch or bite
- Dental issues -overgrown incisors
- Obesity
- Respiratory infections
- Tumours- any lump that appears on your rat should be investigated promptly. Unfortunately tumours are very common in pet rats and they can grow quickly.

Insurance:

Unfortunately, we can never predict what may happen to our rats, so we highly recommend getting pet insurance. A monthly fee can give you peace of mind knowing your rat is covered for the best treatment should anything happen. There are many insurance companies available, so we advise contacting each of them to find a policy that is right for you. We advise a policy that will cover your rat for their whole lifetime, for chronic illnesses and for the maximum amount that is available. If this is not possible then covering your rat for as much as you can afford will give you peace of mind should an accident or emergency occur.