



## Rat Husbandry Sheet

Rats (*Rattus norvegicus*) make wonderful pets and come in a variety of colors and coat types. Rats tend to be a very social and bond to their owners and other rats very well. Rats live for 2-3 years and make great companions. It is important to note that rats can be prone to upper respiratory infections and tumors. They also produce a substance called porphyrin, which is a similar color to blood and can be found coming from the eyes and nose. A small amount is normal but can be startling. If anything seems out of the ordinary, please contact your veterinarian.

### Housing

Rats need a cage with a flat bottom. Wire-bottom cages can cause a variety of foot issues. The cage should be 28x14x17in for rats as a minimum. However, a bigger cage is always better. Rats should be housed in wire enclosures to ensure adequate air flow. Any wire cages should have horizontal bars that are spaced close enough so your rodent cannot squeeze through them. We recommend using Carefresh® bedding, paper towel or newspaper for bedding. Do not use cedar or other wood chips for bedding because they are potentially toxic to your pet. For a less expensive option, fleece can be used to line the cage and shelving. This does require more frequent cage cleaning but is super cozy.

Rats are extremely social animals and should be housed in same-sex groups. In general, rats are happier and healthier if kept with at least one companion. Some aggression can occur, but this typically occurs in unneutered male rats. This aggression can typically be aided by increasing cage sizes, feeding separately, and neutering. It is rare, but possible, that your rat will not tolerate a companion. In these cases, make sure to allow for plenty of human interaction for your pet.

You should provide hiding spots for your rat so they can have some privacy and a sense of safety. Rodents have teeth that continuously grow throughout their life, they will chew on nearly everything in order to keep their teeth worn down to an appropriate length. Because of this, any hides should be chew proof, or edible so nothing harmful is accidentally consumed. You should also provide lots of toys for your rodent to chew. There is a variety of commercially available wooden chew toys available, but they also enjoy chewing on cardboard. Changing toys and hiding places around every few days will help to mentally stimulate your rodent.

## **Feeding**

There is a variety of commercially available diets for rats. These diets, such as the brand Oxbow, tend to be nutritionally balanced and provide all the necessary nutrients for your rodents. Be sure to use a chew proof feeding dish for everything given to your pet. You can give fruits and vegetables as treats. Some examples that are good to give to your rodent would be: apples, pears, bananas, melon, broccoli, carrots, and celery. Be sure to remove seeds/skins before giving them to your rodent and remove any fresh food items they do not eat so they do not spoil in the cage.

Fresh water should be given daily. Water bottles that attach to the cage and have chew proof mouth pieces tend to work best. Rats do enjoy bathing as well, so you can offer a dish of water for drinking and bathing – just be sure to clean frequently.

## **Cleaning**

The cleaner your cage is, the healthier your rodent will be. The bedding should be spot cleaned regularly and fully replaced approximately every week. The cage should be thoroughly cleaned with a commercial cage cleaner or dilute bleach solution. Be sure to rinse the cage fully and allow the cage to completely dry before replacing bedding and furniture. All wooden toys should be discarded after a while because they cannot fully be cleaned. Water bottles and food dishes should be cleaned and disinfected weekly with the cage as well. Some of these accessories can also be placed in the dishwasher for easy cleaning.

## **Enrichment**

Even though we do our best as pet owners to provide the best care possible, sometimes that is just not enough. Some pets need additional stimuli/enrichment in addition to the right food, water and housing. Below are some options to increase the value of your pet's day-to-day lives. There is an infinite amount of ways to enrich your rat's life. Use your imagination, but here are a few to start:

- Hide outs/tunnels: Rats naturally desire to burrow and nest and enjoy hide boxes and tunnels.
  - PVC piping can be used to create tunnels and cardboard boxes provide nice hiding opportunities.
  - Some commercially available hay-based igloos or houses can provide an edible house.
  - Rats also like variety – try offering some hanging hammocks to change things up.
- Chewing: Rats will chew on anything and everything! Make sure to provide a variety of wooden or hay-based things for your pet to chew on.
  - Careful using plastic toys as these are not “chew-proof” and may be accidentally eaten
  - This can also be as simple as rolled up paper or cardboard tubes.
- Mazes: For some out of the cage stimulation you can create a maze or obstacles for your pet to work through. Rats work well for food and can be taught many tricks.

- Wheel: Rats are very active creatures; a wheel provides that ability to burn off the extra energy.
  - Solid bottom wheels are preferred to prevent injury
- Toys: Rats are very intelligent and typically enjoy new things. This can be as simple as chew blocks or even bird toys to destroy or carry around.
  - Large bird toys can be the perfect toy and are typically more durable than other similar toys. Make sure to watch for small pieces or things your pet may be able to ingest.
- Climbing/Exploration: Rats love to run, jump and climb. Consider ropes, ladders, cargo nets, hanging beds and shelving to enhance their space.
- Foraging: Hiding high value treats (such as fruit) in something to make your pet work a little for their food is beneficial.
  - Try fishing for food out of water, digging in substrate or just hiding food items for your pet to search out.
  - Placing fruit snacks or peas into a shallow dish of water will entice your rat to go diving.

Just make sure if making anything at home to avoid sticky tape, sharp edges, and chemicals. Be careful about disease transfer using anything from outside or another animal. Keep in mind that your pet can and will eat things they are not supposed to – monitor closely.