

Avian and Exotic Animal Clinic

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Care of Rats

Introduction: Rats come in a variety of breeds, including masked, hooded, hairless, tailless, rex, and a number of others. Rats can also be long-haired, curly, patched, and short-haired. Rats are tame, intelligent, and make good pets for children. They rarely bite unless they are provoked. Both males and females will reach sexual maturity at 65-110 days of age. Their gestation period is approximately 21 days long. The average litter size for a rat is 10-12. Rats in captivity can live for 2-3.5 years.

Diet:

- A high quality commercial pelleted or block diet should make up about 80% of the diet. Pellets or blocks should contain 25-27% protein and should not contain dried fruits, seeds, or nuts, which are high in calories. Pellets should be softened for rats for rats less than 3 weeks of age.
- The remaining 20% of the diet should consist of healthy table foods, such as whole grains, vegetables, and fruits. Occasional seeds or pieces of nut can be offered as a treat. Food can be used to provide enrichment by hiding a favorite treat inside of a toilet paper roll or cardboard box stuffed with newspaper or hay.
- Fresh water should be available through a bottle or bowl at all times and should be changed daily.

Captivity Requirements:

- Minimum cage size for one rat is at least 15-20" x 7-10" high. Larger cages should be provided if multiple rats are housed together.
- Cages should have a solid bottom, as wire flooring can cause foot problems. Appropriate bedding choices include recycled paper bedding (3-5" deep) or fleece. Avoid wood shavings, as they contain respiratory/skin irritants and (in some cases) liver toxins. Bedding should be changed 1-2 times per week, or more often as needed.
- Avoid housing rats in aquariums or other cages with solid sides that impair ventilation. If using a wire-sided cage, be sure that the bars are close enough together that the rat cannot escape!
- Rats also like to have a hide box where they can feel secure in the cage. If housing multiple rats in one cage, each rat should have its own hide box.
- Rats are social animals and most enjoy having a friend! Not all rats get along, so always introduce a new animal gradually and under supervision.

Veterinary Care

- Exams: We recommend wellness exams for rats every 6-9 months.
- Spaying/neutering: Spaying female rats is recommended to reduce their risk of mammary tumors. Neutering males may help to prevent urine marking and allows rats of different sexes to be housed together.
- Respiratory disease: Respiratory infections are very common in rats and can lead to fatal pneumonia if left untreated. Rats that are sneezing frequently or have red nasal/eye discharge should be evaluated by a veterinarian.
- Tumors/abscesses: Rats very commonly get skin tumors and abscesses secondary to bite wounds. Many of these masses are benign, but can be very difficult to remove if allowed to get too big. If you notice a mass on your rat, we recommend having it removed as soon as possible, while it is still small.