

Green Stone Rodent's



RAT CARE GUIDE

How to look after your pet rat!

THE BASICS

As experienced owners will tell you, there is a lot more to owning pet rats than putting them in a cage and providing them with food and water. Like most pets, they need love and attention. Rats are highly intelligent animals, so it's in your best interests to make sure they're cared for properly!

Here are some basic facts about rats that you may like to know before we start:

- * The life expectancy of a rat is 2-3 years. Some may live up to 4.
- * Rats are healthier and happier when they live in same-sex pairs.
- * The cost of a rat itself is very cheap at around \$10-\$30.
- * The accessories for a rat to live a happy, healthy, peaceful life, are not.
- * The species of rat that are kept as pets are called Norway Rats (*Rattus Norvegicus*).
- * Rats are omnivorous.
- * Males are called 'bucks', females are called 'does'.
- * Rats are extremely intelligent animals.
- * Female rats usually weigh from 350g-450, while males weigh from 450g-650g.
- * Rats are capable of great affection and are naturally inquisitive.
- * Rats have delicate respiratory systems.
- * They are capable of jumping 3 feet (1 metre) or more in one leap.
- * They are VERY cute!

FOOD

Feeding your pet rat is a bit more complicated than picking up a rat and mouse mix from the supermarket or pet store. Their nutritional needs can't be met by these mixes, and there is much debate in the rodent fancier's community as to what the ideal diet is. Some say an exclusive diet of rat lab pellets is ideal, whereas others argue a grain and cereal mix is more interesting for rats, and most parties believe that regardless of which of the two you choose, it must be supplemented with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Daily Diet

The rats at GreenStone Rodents are fed a mix of grains, cereals, lab pellets for their main diet. The following is a list of the items that go into the mix:

- * Rolled Oats
- * Norco Rat & Mouse Cubes
- * Lowan's Apple and Cinnamon Muesli
- * Puffed Rice
- * Puffed Corn
- * Wheat Flakes
- * Purina Supercoat Light & Mature Dog Food
- * Sunflower Kernels
- * Pepitas

All of these ingredients can be picked up from your local supermarket, and should be mixed together and kept in an airtight container for up to 3 months. This is a relatively low sugar, low G.I. food that is available to them 24 hours a day. The dog food is added for extra protein. It's important to note that a diet high in protein can lead to 'hot spots' on your pet, which are uncomfortable and can cause patchiness in fur.

Fresh Food

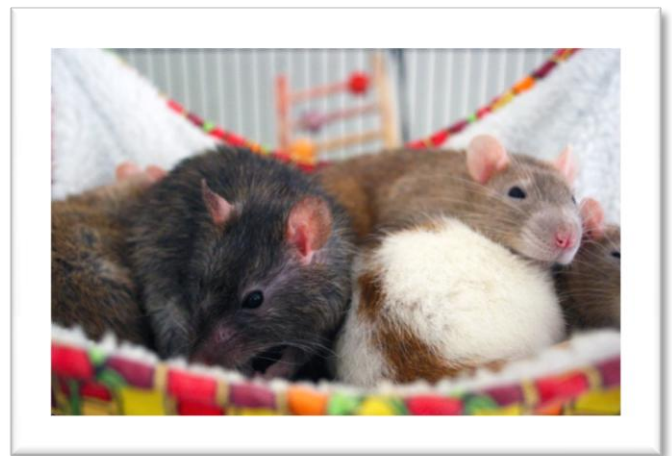
Fresh fruit and vegetables should also be fed to your pet rats, ideally once a day. Some good choices are cooked sweet potato, fresh corn on the cob, broccoli, apple, carrot, banana, pear, strawberries and peas. Low fat nuts in the shell (such as macadamia nuts or walnuts) are good treats, and also help to wear their constantly growing teeth down. Rats are omnivores, so an occasional treat of a hard-boiled egg, oysters or strips of cooked chicken on the thigh bone are welcomed. If your rat is undergoing a treatment of antibiotics or just needs some more good fat in their diet, try feeding them natural yoghurt.

CAGES AND BEDDING

The cage is where your rats are going to spend most of their time, and what most of your budget will go towards when you first bring your new pet home. There are a few things to keep in mind when selecting a cage. The first thing you should look for is the material. A good cage to start with is a wire cage with a bar spacing of 1.5cm or less, so it's strong, safe and escape proof. They are easy to clean and allow for good airflow. Aquariums should be avoided, as these have very poor ventilation and trap in the ammonia from your rat's excrement and this will damage their delicate respiratory system.

A good sized cage for two to three rats is one that approximately measures 45cm x 60cm x 60cm and has a litter tray and three levels. These cages can be found in most pet stores and cost from \$60 to \$90 AUD.

To make the cage more comfortable and easier to clean, you'll want to use a litter, preferably one as dust free as possible. One good choice is Breeder's Choice Cat Litter, which is available at most supermarkets. It's a paper pellet litter that's virtually dust free. Another is polar fleece, which is colourful, machine washable and reusable. Pine and cedar shavings are not recommended, as these woods contain toxic chemicals called 'phenols', which are damaging to sensitive rat lungs.



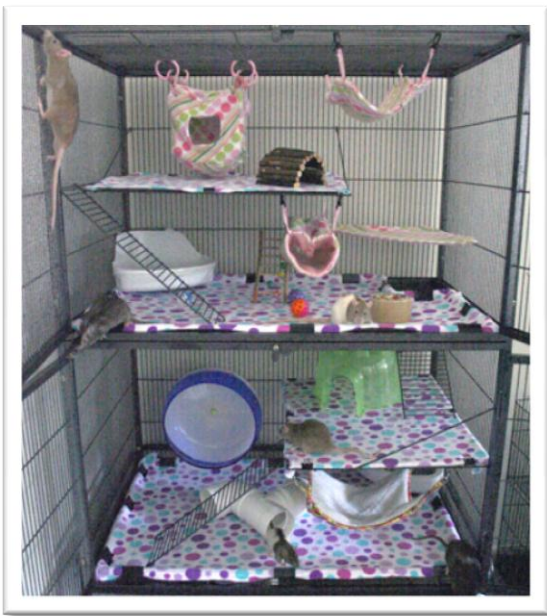
The does of GSR in a store bought hammock

To make your rat feel at home and to keep them feeling safe, you will need to provide shelter and warmth. This can come in the form of hammocks, igloos and beds. Hammocks are often stocked in pet stores, but are easy to make at home as well. Igloos can also be bought in pet stores, but are easy to construct from ice cream containers. Simply cut a hole in one side, smooth any rough edges and place in the cage. Beds can also be bought from pet stores, but once again there are alternatives, like a small old cushion that's too ratty for use, or an old t-shirt bundled up.

Most importantly, you'll need to provide a hanging water bottle and a heavy-bottomed dish for water and food.

TOYS AND ENRICHMENT

Rats get bored very easily, which can lead to destructive behavior. There are a few cheap and easy options you can explore to keep them entertained. Tissue boxes make great destructible hidey-holes. Large mailing tubes are fun to run through and sleep in, as are PVC pipes which you can pick up from hardware stores. Cat balls with bells inside them are fun to carry and toss, and many colourful bird toys are fun to play with and safe to chew. Wooden ladders are good for climbing and chewing, as are wooden mats. A toilet roll with treats inside and the ends folded in can keep a rat busy for a fair while.



Another way to keep your rat busy and fit is to get them a wheel. It is recommended that you purchase a wheel such as the Wodent Wheel or the Silent Spinner, as these both are made of plastic, which means they're safe on tails and feet and they're easy to clean. You will want to buy one that is at least a 12" model, anything smaller is too uncomfortable.

HEALTH

While rats will live their life care free and healthy, they can get sick. The most common ailment is Mycoplasmosis, which is when a bacteria that lives in their nose infects their respiratory tract and damages their lungs and throat. Symptoms include frequent sneezing, an over-production of porphyrin (a dark red discharge) around the eyes and nose, gasping, wheezing and rattling in the chest. If your pet shows any of these symptoms, it is recommended that you visit the vet as soon as possible. The usual treatment of Myco is a long course of antibiotics, for at least two weeks. An effective treatment for a serious case of Myco would be a combination of Baytril and Doxycycline (or "Doxy"). The preferred kind of dosing method is liquid given to your rat from a syringe into their mouth, or mixed in with a delicious food (like flavoured natural yoghurt).

Another common issue is mites and lice. Mites are the most common; symptoms include scratching, redness on the skin around the neck and behind the ears, hair loss from over-grooming. Treatment is easy; just place a tiny drop of Revolution for Puppies and Kittens between the shoulder blades of every rat, and clean out the cage.

Strokes can effect rats as well, although they are not very common and mostly effect elderly rats. Signs of a stroke include loss of use of one or more limbs, loss of muscle control, head tilting, lethargy and numbness. Strokes are treatable with steroids. Not much is known about their prevention; however a rat that has suffered a stroke can lead a fulfilling life afterwards.

Lastly, tumors are also a common ailment. Most tumors are benign, and can be operated on, which can relieve your rat of the discomfort of having a tumor. Tumor removal can be a stressful procedure, so think about the benefits, such as a new lease of life and comfort, and the negatives, such as side effects of the surgery and the cost, of the removal before you proceed with the surgery. It's best to consult your vet before making your final decision.

HYGIENE

Rats are very clean animals. In fact, they often spend a good portion of their waking hours grooming themselves and their cage mates. Sometimes they do need a little help, especially if they're messy or a buck with a 'buck grease' problem (this can be resolved through de-sexing your buck). Be sure to clean the cage at least twice a week or more, and make sure their food and water is fresh and free of gunk. Most rats don't enjoy bath time, but sometimes it is necessary for everyone. To bathe your rat, fill a large sink or bath tub with an inch of warm (not hot) water. Pour water over their back, careful to not get any in their eyes or ears. Massage in a mild soap, like a sensitive skin baby wash or special rodent shampoo, then rinse off with warm water before drying them off gently with a towel. It is recommended that you wear a long sleeved shirt, as they will try to climb up your arms and escape from the water, especially if they're unfamiliar.

TRAINING AND TRICKS

Rats are very clever, and can be taught many tricks. One handy training tip is to teach your rats to use a litter box. This is so they go to the toilet in the one place, making the cage easier to clean. Start by placing the litter box in the cage, put the litter inside and add any 'rat raisins' that you can see around the cage to make it smell like the bathroom area. Encourage your rat to go there, and place them in the tray when you see them doing their business elsewhere in the cage. Reward them when you catch them in the act with praise and food treats. Soon they will go there by themselves.

You can also teach them to come when they're called, if they get to play on the floor. Place the rat in the play area, walk away from them, then call them over by their name (or whatever you like) and offer them a treat and praise them once they come to you. Repeat this several times for a short time every day until they learn it. It's an easy trick for them to learn, and comes in handy when they go into hiding.

MORE INFORMATION

If you require more information on rats or rodents in general, please visit the following links:

www.greenstonerodents.weebly.com

A rodent website based in Queensland, Australia, with advice for all rat owners, as well as an image gallery and blog.

www.sunshinerats.com

A breeder's website. This breeder is based in Brisbane, Queensland, and has several years experience in breeding healthy and unique rats. The website also contains valuable information on care and rat varieties.

www.australianratforum.com

A friendly rat (and mouse) forum where you can ask questions without judgment and receive advice on all things ratty.

www.dapper.com.au

An Australian rat care website.