

All About Pets

The national pet care information service

CARING FOR YOUR RAT



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Domestic rats are clean, intelligent, enjoy human company and make wonderful pets.

Although domestic rats belong to the same species as the wild rat, they should not be thought of in the same way. Provided pet rats have been handled and socialised correctly from birth, you can share your home with them free from worry that they will be aggressive or spread disease.



There are many varieties of rats with different coat and eye colours, including white with dark or pink eyes, cinnamon, blue and parti-coloured. Male rats are called bucks, females are does and babies are known as kittens. The average lifespan is about two and a half years.

Rats need company of their own kind, so it is unfair to keep one on its own. To avoid unwanted babies, the best set-up is usually a pair or group of the same sex. Rats will breed frequently from as early as five weeks old, producing a litter of eight or more young each time. The best place to buy a rat is from a reputable breeder and a baby should be at least six weeks old before it leaves its parents. The Blue Cross occasionally takes in pet rats for rehoming – please contact your local adoption centre for details.

Before you go ahead and find your new pets, be sure you can give them enough time. Rats need at least an hour's exercise outside the cage every day and whilst they make great family pets, should not be looked after or handled by unsupervised children.

Home comforts

The best home for your rats is a wire cage, the larger and taller the better as rats are active and love to climb. Hamster cages are not big enough – as a minimum guide, a rat cage should be at least 50 cms x 80 cms x 50 cms. The floor should be solid, rather than wire with a solid tray underneath, to avoid trapping and injuring the animals' feet and limbs. Aquarium-style glass cages should not be used, as the ventilation is inadequate.

Litter should be put on the floor to absorb ammonia from droppings. Good quality dust-extracted wood shavings make the best base and can be bought from most pet shops. Cat litter is unsuitable as bedding, but can be used as a litter tray. Your rats will also need a nest box where they can sleep and enjoy a bit of peace and quiet. A cardboard box with shredded paper bedding is ideal. Rats are susceptible both to extreme cold and to heat dehydration, both of which can be fatal, so make sure the cage is in a suitable environment away from direct sunlight and draughts.

Food for thought

Rats are omnivores and thrive on a varied diet that includes grains, vegetables and a protein source such as dry dog food. Commercial mixes are available from pet shops. While rats are fond of titbits and household scraps, don't let them get too fat. They will enjoy the occasional pieces of fruit and vegetables – but avoid peanuts and sunflower seeds, as these tend to cause skin problems. Fresh, clean water must always be available. If a water bottle is used it should be cleaned and re-filled daily and checked to ensure it is not blocked or leaking.

Health matters

Check your rat daily for any general signs of ill health, such as loss of appetite or lethargy. One of the most common problems in rats is infectious respiratory disease, but this can only be passed from one rat to another – it cannot affect other species or humans. Be wary of buying a rat from environments where there are a lot of other rats, particularly if any of them have rapid or noisy breathing.

Red discharge around the eyes or nose is a sign of illness and stress, although the redness is not blood but a natural pigment in the mucus. Some rats develop tumours as they get older – these are more common in females. While rats can be easily castrated, it is generally only necessary to prevent unwanted breeding or to stop aggression towards other rats or humans.

Rats are naturally very clean and spend a lot of time grooming themselves, although some may need their tails cleaning occasionally. This should be done gently with mild soap or animal shampoo. If you're worried about any change in your rat's health, consult your vet.



Exercise and entertainment

Rats need at least an hour's playtime outside the cage every day, but you must first make the room safe and rat-proof! Keep doors and windows closed and block cracks in floorboards, as rats can get through seemingly impassable gaps. Keep houseplants out of the way, as some are poisonous. Electric cables should be passed through piping so that they cannot be chewed. Rats may enjoy toys such as bits of plastic drainpipe or cardboard boxes, but avoid wheels with spokes as they can cause serious injury.

Company

Rats naturally live in social groups and it is unfair to keep one alone. A same-sex pair or group will be much happier and two cost little more to keep than one. Never breed rats unless you have guaranteed good, responsible homes waiting – and remember there may be eight or more babies in each litter.

Getting to know you

Rats which have been handled correctly from soon after birth will enjoy the experience. To get them used to you, try carrying them around the house inside your jumper! Never pick up a rat by its tail, as this can cause injury. Instead, put your hand underneath its chest behind its front legs, holding but not squeezing. Children will enjoy handling rats, but must be supervised to make sure they do not hold them too tightly.

Don't forget

- Keep your rats in same-sex pairs or groups. Make sure you understand all the responsibilities involved before keeping a pair for breeding.
- Be prepared to spend at least an hour a day handling your rats and letting them exercise outside their cage, in safe surroundings
- Don't overfeed – a fit rat is healthier and should live longer than a fat rat
- Ignore anyone who says pet rats are dirty. They are one of the cleanest pets you can own and do not pose health threats to people or other animals.

Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk, the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.



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