



# Exotic Animal Hospital

of Philadelphia

## Rats

You got a new rat? Congratulations!

Please refer to this handout in helping you setting your new rat up for success as most of the diseases and emergency presentations to the veterinary hospital stem from improper husbandry and could be avoided.

### Did you know?

- The average life span is 2-3 years
- The **fancy rat** (*Rattus norvegicus domestica*) is the **domesticated** form of *Rattus norvegicus*, the **brown rat**, and the most common **species of rat** kept as a **pet**.
- Fancy rats were originally targets for blood sport in 18th- and 19th-century Europe. Later bred as pets, they now come in a wide variety of coat colors and patterns
- Generally speaking, rats are quite sociable and function best with at least one cage mate. It is generally ill-advised to keep a single rat unless there are severe behavioral problems.
- The earlier rats are introduced to one another, the better. Often, rat breeders will encourage new owners to take two or more rats of the same sex from the same litter for starters



### Enclosure:

- Provide the largest cage possible for your pet rat. Rodents are notorious chewers so cages of stainless steel, durable plastic, or wire are recommended. **Avoid** cages constructed from wood or soft metal.
- Cages with a solid plastic base with closely spaced metal bars are ideal for both containment and ventilation purposes.
  - Aquarium tanks do not provide sufficient ventilation and should be avoided.
- Provide ample nesting material and deep bedding for burrowing, resting, and to soak up urine. Select clean, absorbent, non-toxic, and odor free bedding. Recycled paper products like care fresh or paper towels
- **AVOID**
  - Cedar shavings contain chemicals that are toxic and can cause irritation.
  - Corncob bedding has a tendency to mold and can lead to intestinal obstruction if ingested.

Exotic Animal Hospital of Philadelphia  
info@eahphilly.vet  
Lafeber vet

- Sawdust or any pine shavings can cause irritation to the eyes and the respiratory tract.
- Also provide shredded paper towels or tissue as nesting material.
  - **Avoid** the commercially available fluffy cotton wool products as these materials are indigestible and can lead to intestinal obstruction if eaten.
- Provide tunnels, exercise wheels, and nest boxes to help maintain the mental well-being of your pet.
- Offer cardboard tube rolls and wood blocks as chew toys.
- Optimal temperature range for rodents falls between 65-78°F, with a relative humidity of 40-70%.
- Keep the cage out of direct sunlight and away from other heat sources, such as a radiator, or drafts.
- Rats are sociable creatures. Adult males should be housed separately unless they are littermates or introduced at a young age. Females or mixed sex pairs do well together. If keeping mixed pairs, have the male neutered, as rats are prolific breeders
- Clean the cage and all cage furniture thoroughly once or twice weekly. Change the bedding and disinfect all areas of the habitat. Clean food dishes and the water bottle.

### What should they eat?

- A rodent ration containing 12-16% protein and 4-6% fat, either in pellet or block form, is recommended for pet rats.
- Supplement the diet with small amounts of freshly washed, nutrient-dense fresh fruits such as berries, bananas, papaya, apricot, and raw vegetables such as peas, sweet potato, broccoli, corn-on-the-cob, and dark, leafy greens.
- Occasional treats that will be eagerly devoured by your pet can include:
  - Sugar-free or low-sugar cereals (Cheerios, General Mills; puffed wheat, rice, or millet cereals, or spoon-size shredded wheat)
  - Plain popcorn
  - Dry oatmeal
  - Whole wheat pasta or bread
- AVOID seed-based diets since they predispose rats to obesity and nutritional deficiencies.
- AVOID cheese as it is high in fat and rodents cannot tolerate large amounts of lactose.
- Vegetable-based protein, such as lentils, can also be offered as an occasional snack, however **avoid animal protein**. Although rats enjoy eating meat, a high protein diet has been associated with the development of kidney disease in adult animals.
- Make fresh water available in a water bottle, and position the sipper tube low enough to allow your pet easy access. Rats will only drink a fraction of the total bottle volume, but the bottle should be emptied, cleaned and filled with fresh water daily.

### Common health issues:

- **Pneumonia**

- Respiratory infections are unfortunately common and are caused by a number of viral and bacterial agents. Many of the disease causing organisms inhabit the respiratory tracts of clinically normal pets.
- Conditions of stress, inadequate diet, and improper husbandry will often predispose a pet to an opportunistic infection with one or more of these agents.
- Symptoms of pneumonia may include dyspnea (difficulty breathing), discharge from the nose and eyes, lethargy and inappetence. In some cases, sudden death will occur without any of these signs.
- Veterinary consultation should be sought when a pet exhibits any of the above symptoms. Aggressive antibiotic therapy in addition to supportive care of the patient may be necessary to get the condition under control. Unfortunately, even though elimination of the symptoms may be possible with appropriate therapy, eradication of the causative bacteria often is not.

- **Mammary Fibroadenomas (tumors)**

- Both male and female rats are prone to developing large, slow growing tumors of the mammary tissue which can occur almost anywhere on the body.
- Although these tumors are benign and do not spread, they tend to recur quickly in the same location or anywhere in the mammary tissue.
- There is some evidence that spaying female rats of some strains under four months of age can protect against this type of cancer occurring although it is not known if this is true for all rat strains.

It was a pleasure working with your pet today, please feel free to contact us with any questions or concerns



Exotic Animal Hospital of Philadelphia  
info@eahphilly.vet  
Lafeber vet