

Evergreen Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital

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Rat Basics

-Cathy A. Johnson-Delaney, DVM

Life Span: 2.5-4 years. Record published is 4 years 8 months



Species: *Rattus norvegicus* is believed to be the ancestor of pet rats. Common names include common rat and Norway rat. Many strains exist, such as the Sprague-Dawley, Harlan, Fancy, Rex and Nude.

Adult Weight: Males: 450-520 grams (16-19 ounces); Females 250-300 grams (9 to 11 ounces)

Food Intake (grams per 100 grams body weight per day) 5-6 grams (about 1 tablespoon)

Diet: Commercial rodent blocks or pellets with about 20 percent protein should be 95% of daily intake. Limit

treats. If you choose to feed treats, offer fruits, vegetables or dog biscuits. Avoid sugary, fatty foods. The amount of treats per day for an adult rat shouldn't exceed 1 teaspoon. Fresh water should always be available.

Housing: A wire cage is preferred for better air circulation; the larger the better. Bars should be no more than a ½ inch apart. Also required: bedding such as recycled newspaper products, hardwood shavings, newspaper. Exercise wheel. Mounted food dish or heavy crock dish. Water bottle with sipper tube. Nest box. Tubes as tunnels (best made of polyvinylchloride (pvc) or stainless steel – rats can chew through plastics, wood, cardboard). Toys: such as nylon bones, chew toys made for tiny dogs, small hard plastic balls, natural branches made of maple, true willow (hardwood) for chewing.

Bedding specifics: Various are available. Any that becomes damp (even drips from water bottle or urine) or soiled with feces should be removed daily. Total depth is usually 1-2 inches of bedding. Minimally change all of it 2-3 times a week to prevent fecal pellet buildup.

Environmental Conditions: Temperature: 65-79 degrees Fahrenheit. Higher temperatures may cause heatstroke. Relative humidity of 40-70 percent is recommended.

Handling: Rats are very intelligent and social animals. They like attention and like to be carried around on people's shoulders. They are social with other rats, and preferably should not be kept as solitary rats. Do not leave them unattended in the presence of other pets such as cats and dogs.

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Medical Concerns: Obesity, respiratory diseases, tumors, dental problems, skin and coat problems, bladder stones and kidney disease, and diarrhea. **A sick rat does not groom itself and quickly looks scruffy. It needs to be taken to the veterinarian immediately.**

Grooming: fastidious, self-groom multiple times daily. Bathing is rarely needed unless they have gotten into something sticky or noxious such as paint or waste materials.

Bathing: Only if necessary to remove something sticky, noxious. Use a dilute puppy or kitten shampoo (1 part shampoo to 3-4 parts water). Rinse well in warm water, and dry with a towel. Allow the rat to wriggle through towels to dry itself. Do not put it back in its cage with bedding until it is completely dry as bedding can stick to damp fur.

General Tips: Healthy rats do not have any discharges from the eyes or nose. Their rear ends should be clean. If there is fur matting around the face and porphyrin (“red tears”) is present, staining around eyes, nose, then something is wrong health-wise and the rat needs to be seen by the veterinarian. Porphyrin is a reddish brown pigment excreted due to irritation, infection, or as part of general stress. Always check the forepaws for matted fur or redness as rats will wipe away the pigment and discharges with their paws during face-cleaning. Your veterinarian can tell the difference between porphyrin and blood by using a urine-test dipstick for blood or a Wood’s lamp (ultraviolet light spectrum). Porphyrin fluoresces and blood does not. If urine or feces is stuck to the rat’s rear end, or fur is stained from urine and/or feces, the rat is ill and needs to be seen.