Caring for your rats

The charity dedicated to helping sick, injured and homeless pets since 1897.
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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 viewed in the same way. Provided that 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 rat with different coat and eye colours. These include white, cinnamon, blue and parti-coloured coats with dark or pink eyes. Male rats are called bucks, females are does and babies are known as kittens. On average, they live for around two and a half years.

Rats need company of their own kind, so it’s unfair to keep one on its own. To avoid unwanted babies, the best option 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. Females can become pregnant again within 24 hours of giving birth.

The best place to buy a rat is from a reputable breeder and a baby should be at least six weeks old. Make sure they have been properly sexed and separated from the opposite sex by the time the males are five weeks old. If you buy from a pet shop, staff should be able to handle the rats confidently and show you how to tell what sex they are.

Make sure all animals in the shop are in clean, good-sized cages with fresh food and water. Blue Cross occasionally takes in pet rats for rehoming – please contact your local centre for details.

Before buying 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, while 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. A rat cage should be at least 50cm x 80cm floor space, by 50cm tall. The floor should be solid rather than wire, with a solid tray underneath, to avoid a rat trapping and injuring its feet or limbs. Aquarium-style glass cages shouldn’t be used because the ventilation isn’t good enough.

Litter should be put on the floor to absorb ammonia from droppings. Litter training your rats will help to keep their cage clean. Use dust-extracted bedding to avoid respiratory problems (see Health matters). Cat litter is unsuitable as bedding but can be used in your rat’s litter tray. Rats 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. They also enjoy a hammock hanging in their cage – this can easily be made from an old towel or similar material. Rats are
susceptible to extreme cold and heat dehydration, both of which can be fatal, so make sure the cage is in a suitable environment away from direct sunlight and draughts. They also enjoy a hammock hanging in their cage – this can easily be made from an old towel or similar material.

**Food for thought**

Rats are omnivores and love 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, do not let them get too fat. They enjoy occasional pieces of fruit, vegetables, peanuts and sunflower seeds, but these can cause skin problems, so should be a rare treat.

Fresh, clean water must always be available. If a water bottle is used it should be cleaned, refilled and checked daily 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 can’t affect other species or humans. Be wary of buying a rat from somewhere with many other rats, particularly if any of them have rapid or noisy breathing. Other respiratory problems are also common in rats.

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 the occasional 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 cleaned occasionally. This should be done gently with mild animal shampoo. If you are worried about any change in your rat’s health, consult your vet.
Exercise and entertainment

Rats need at least an hour’s playtime outside their 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 house plants out of the way because some are poisonous to rats. Electric cables should be passed through piping so they cannot be chewed. Rats may enjoy toys such as pieces of plastic drainpipe or cardboard boxes, but avoid wheels with spokes as they can cause a serious injury.

Company

Rats naturally live in social groups so it is unfair to keep one alone. A same-sex pair or group will be much happier and two rats don’t cost much more to keep than one.

Getting to know you

Rats that are handled correctly soon after they are born will enjoy it. To help them get used to you, try carrying them around the house inside your jumper! Never pick up a rat by its tail as this can injure them. Instead, put one hand underneath its chest behind its forelegs, and support the hindlegs with your other hand, holding but not squeezing. Children will enjoy handling rats, but must be supervised to make sure they do not hold them too tightly.

Rats as children’s pets

Rats make good companions for children and adults. However, they do need daily social interaction and time out of their cage, so it is important that everyone in the family is keen on the idea of keeping rats as pets. Rats need larger cages than the smaller rodents but, being larger, they are easier to handle than small rodents. As with all children’s pets, it is important that an adult is responsible for making sure the rats receive the attention and care they need.

Don’t forget...

- Keep your rats in same-sex pairs or groups
- Spend at least an hour a day handling your rats and letting them exercise outside their cage, in safe surroundings
- It is important not to overfeed – a fit rat is healthier and should live longer than a fat rat
- Rats are one of the cleanest pets you can own and do not pose health threats to people or other animals
Blue Cross advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it’s about a dog or a degu, we’re here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at www.bluecross.org.uk

Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:
• blog posts from Blue Cross experts
• latest news
• events near you
• pets needing new homes

Or you can join in the chat on our online communities. Find us on Twitter and Facebook – just search for Blue Cross.

Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what’s needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We’re a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

How you can help

Blue Cross doesn’t receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit www.bluecross.org.uk

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