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Rat Care

INTRODUCTION

Rats are highly social animals that make excellent pets for children if properly cared for. If they are raised as pets and gently handled, rats will rarely bite. They are intelligent and can be taught tricks as well as to respond to their names. The average lifespan for a pet rat is 2-3 years.

HOUSING

Cage – Each rat requires a minimum of 40 square inches of floor space and at least a height of 7 inches. Cage material can include wire, stainless steel, or durable plastic/glass. At least 1 side of the enclosure must be open for air circulation. Cage bottoms should be solid as wire or mesh bottoms can irritate feet.

Substrate – Deep bedding (at least 1 inch) with ample nesting material is recommended. Bedding must be clean, non-toxic, and absorbent. Paper pulp products (Carefresh or Yesterday's News), shredded newspaper or shredded computer paper are recommended. Wood chips and shavings (especially cedar and pine) are NOT recommended as they can cause respiratory disease.

Furniture – Cage furniture (large exercise wheels, tunnels, hide boxes, etc) is highly recommended for enrichment and play. Small cardboard boxes, paper towel rolls, tissue boxes, etc. can be used as hide boxes.

Temperature – The optimal temperature for rats is between 65-80°F.

Cage mates – Rats can be housed as individuals, in same sex pairs, or in small groups. Fighting can occur and close monitoring is necessary. Spaying and neutering is recommended in mixed gender groups. There should be multiple food and water sources in group cages. If rats are kept individually, they should be handled every day.

Cleaning – The cage and all accessories should be cleaned at least once a week with hot water and a non-toxic disinfectant or detergent, then rinsed thoroughly. We recommended cleaning the cage every day. Food and water dishes should be cleaned thoroughly every day.

DIET

Rat food/rodent blocks – A complete and fortified food should be offered “free-choice.” We recommend the Oxbow Essentials Adult Rat diet. Do not feed mixes containing seeds, dried fruits, or nuts as rats will preferentially consume the seeds/fruits/nuts that are high in fat and low in other nutrients and can lead to obesity and malnutrition.

Treats – Small pieces of fruits, vegetables (bib and red leaf lettuce, parsley, and cilantro), table food, or seeds may be offered. Grass hay can be used to stimulate foraging activity. Oxbow also makes a variety of healthy treats for rats.

Water – Clean water should be provided in sipper bottles or a spill proof bowl. Water should be changed daily.

Cleaning – Bowls and water bottles should be cleaned every day in the dishwasher or with a dilute bleach solution (1:30 bleach to water ratio) soak.

HANDLING

Pet rats become accustomed to handling and will seldom bite if properly restrained. Rats can be picked up by scooping them up. Always use two hands and be gentle. Avoid sudden movements, loud noise, and excitement. Do not pull on the tip of the tail. If children are handling the rat, have them sit on the floor and hold it in their laps. Only allow them to handle the pet with adult supervision.

HEALTH CARE

We recommend a complete physical exam and fecal by an exotic animal veterinarian for all newly acquired pet rats. Thereafter, we recommend exams every 6 months and fecal exams once a year.

Spaying and Neutering – This procedure is recommended at 6 months of age to help decrease incidence of mammary tumors as well as aggression among cage mates.

COMMON MEDICAL PROBLEMS

Respiratory disease – Respiratory infections are very common in rats and should be treated right away as the infection could develop into pneumonia. Symptoms include sneezing and nasal discharge.

Lice and Mites – Skin parasites are common in new pets. Symptoms include itching, red skin, hair loss, and irritability.

Skin Masses – Mammary tumors are extremely common in both male and female rats. Spaying and neutering them at around 6 months of age can help decrease the chances of developing these tumors. Abscesses can be seen in rats that are bit by a cage mate.

Wounds – Rats housed in pairs or groups can fight and often will result in deep wounds.