

## Roger's Aquatics & Pet Supplies: Rats

Rats are an excellent choice as a first pet. They are loving, cuddly, and among the smartest of the rodent species. They live an average of 2 – 4 years, and reach a body size of 9 – 11 inches. These critters have poor eyesight, but make up for it with an excellent sense of smell and great hearing. Many rat owners compare them to miniature dogs due to the fact that they are very trainable, and can be taught tricks with time and patience.

### Enclosure: Size, Bedding, and Accessories

A minimum of 24" long by 12" wide by 12" tall enclosure should be provided for a single rat. Since rats love to be housed with rat friends, a larger cage should be considered. Wire enclosure's bars should be ½ apart, and should have a flat, plastic bottom, not a wire bottom. Aquariums can also be used, but require more frequent and thorough cleaning to prevent ammonia build up. Special care should also be taken to make sure that rats do not overheat in glass enclosures.

The best kinds of bedding are aspen and paper based beddings such as Uber or Fresh 'N Comfy. Cedar should always be avoided as it gives off phenols and acids, which gives the bedding a nice smell, but is toxic to rodents.

Rats love to play and should always have access to several toys. Specifically designed rat toys and bird toys work well. Several spare toys should be kept on hand to rotate in so that the rat does not get bored. Some of the toys should also satisfy the rat's need to chew. An exercise wheel large enough so that the rat's back is straight while running should also be provided, as well as a house for the rat to sleep in. Hammocks and ladders are also popular, and will give the rat more to explore. Providing a concrete block on the cage floor will help wear down their nails, which can quickly become sharp.

Generally speaking, it is best to purchase items that will be right for an adult rat, as they will grow out of baby sized stuff quickly.

### Diet

Rats are omnivores, so they will require both plant and animal matter in their diet. Lab block/pellet diets are ideal as they provide balanced nutrition while also preventing the rat from picking out its favourite foods. If lab block/pellet diet is not available, look for a diet that has pellets, fruits, nuts, veggies, seeds, and grains. Some diets are designed for a specific life stage, so be sure to check labels on food to ensure it is right for you rat. In addition to a commercial diet, a rat's diet should be about 20% fresh fruits and vegetables, and 16 – 18% should be made up of animal protein. A low protein dog food can be mixed in to their diet to help meet their protein needs. Not all foods are safe, so be sure to pick up a veggie list in store, and research food items before giving it the rats.

### Hygiene

Rats are naturally very clean animals, and will probably require very little additional work to keep themselves clean. Over bathing your rat can remove the natural oils they produce, and cause them to have dry skin. From time to time, rats may need their tails cleaned, since they drag it through everything. It is important to be gentle while cleaning the tail so that they don't get hurt while being cleaned.



The enclosure should be cleaned as frequently as needed to maintain a healthy environment. This will depend on how many rats are in the enclosure, as well as how messy the individual rats are. A good starting point is once a week, but it may need to be done more often. The bottom of the enclosure and the sides of the enclosure may need to be wiped down as well. Potty training the rats will help minimize the overall mess of the enclosure. It will also be easier to keep the smell of the rats to a minimum, as the litter box can be dumped out daily.

### Playtime & Handling

Allow lots of exercise time outside of the cage, in rat proof rooms (windows closed, no holes in the wall – anywhere the rat can squeeze its head, its body will get through too – no wires, no house plants as they may be toxic to the rat). Never pick up rats by the tail, use two hands to hold the rat at all times, and always supervise kids when they are with rats.

### Cohabitation

Rats prefer to have friends, as in the wild they live in social colonies. Always choose same sex groups to avoid breeding. Female groups are usually best, although male groups can occasionally work as well. Not all males will get along though, so if multiple males are going to be housed together it is best to get them all at once at a young age. If problems occur, separation or neutering is best.

### Checklist of Supplies

- ✓ Enclosure
- ✓ Water bottle (and hanger if using a glass aquarium)
- ✓ Exercise wheel (large enough that the rat's back will be straight while running)
- ✓ Bedding
- ✓ Food
- ✓ House
- ✓ Several Toys (one or two must be for chewing)
- ✓ Food dish
- ✓ Carrying cage