



Rat and Mouse Care

Introduction

Rats and mice are commonly kept as pets, and rats are suitable small pets for children. Most rats and mice will live together with others of the same species quite happily, although entire males housed together will often fight. They are social animals, and often are more relaxed if given company. It is important to introduce animals simultaneously into their environment – fights may occur if integration is staggered.

General Care

Being a 'prey' species, it is important that rats and mice be kept in an environment that is physically protected from predators. Good ventilation is important, as is ease of cleaning. Fish tank enclosures are not recommended. Wire floored enclosures can lead to foot and leg damage. The wire flooring can be covered with newspaper or towelling for additional safety. Hiding places in the form of boxes, shredded paper or PVC pipes should be provided. These animals are escape artists, so the cage should be carefully checked for small defects that may allow an enterprising rodent freedom. Rats are generally site attached, meaning that they are likely to return to the same area. Mice are not so site attached, and are less likely to be recaptured after escape.

Soiled bedding should be removed daily, and the enclosure should be thoroughly cleaned once or twice a week. Appropriate substrates include newspaper, towels, grass and artificial turf.

Toys for chewing are greatly appreciated – toilet rolls, branches and paper are favourites. Rats and mice often like to 'work out' in an exercise wheel, but make sure that there are no sharp areas or areas that could catch a leg or tail.

Rats and mice handled frequently and gently when young grow to be well socialised adults. When picking up a rodent, it is important to support the entire body. This particularly applies to children, as an animal that does not feel securely held will struggle.

Feeding

Like all animals, rats and mice need access to fresh water. Depending on the owner's (and animal's) preference, this can be provided as a water sipper, or in a bowl. Take care with new pets, as they may not recognise water placed in a different type of container, and can dehydrate.

Rats and mice are omnivorous, which means they eat anything that they can! They are usually fed on a basic diet of rodent pellets, supplemented with fresh foods. Fresh foods can include vegetables, some fruit and low-fat table scraps. Obesity is a common problem, so treats must be carefully controlled.

Lifespan and Weight

The average lifespan for a mouse is 12 to 36 months, while a rat is 26 to 40 months, depending on strain. A mouse weighs 20 to 63g, while a rat weighs 225 to 500g.

Breeding Rats and Mice

Pregnancy lasts for 19 to 21 days in mice and 21 to 23 days in rats. The young wean at around 3 weeks in both species.

Mice can begin to breed at 6 weeks of age; rats at 4 to 5 weeks. It is, however, not recommended to breed them prior to 9 weeks of age.

If mixed sex pairs or groups are kept, and breeding is not required, then castration of the males is advisable.

Common Problems

Rats and mice seem quite prone to mammary tumours. These can become very large, especially in rats. The behaviour of the tumour varies - In rats, 90% of the tumours are benign, while in mice, 90% of the tumours are likely to be malignant. Surgical removal is advisable, although tumours are likely to recur in other areas around the body. The mammary tissue in rodents is not confined to the belly region – it extends around the sides of the animals as well.

Respiratory problems can be severe in rodents. Good ventilation, quarantine of new animals and good hygiene will help reduce the incidence of respiratory diseases, which generally manifest as pneumonia or allergy. Reducing the dustiness of the enclosure is also beneficial.

Pododermatitis, or foot problems, can also occur. This can be reduced by close attention to flooring and hygiene. Nails are usually kept trim by exercise.

Health Checks

We recommend a post-purchase check of your new rodent, to ensure early identification of any problem areas. It will also ensure that the husbandry is optimal. Additionally, regular health checks are advisable, to monitor general health and address any problems sooner rather than later.

