

**Owning rats is great fun and very rewarding, but it is a big responsibility and a long-term commitment.
Did you know rats live on average 2 – 3 years?**

Providing for all your rat's needs is the best way of ensuring their physical and mental wellbeing, resulting in a long, healthy life. Here are some guidelines for offering your rat the best care:



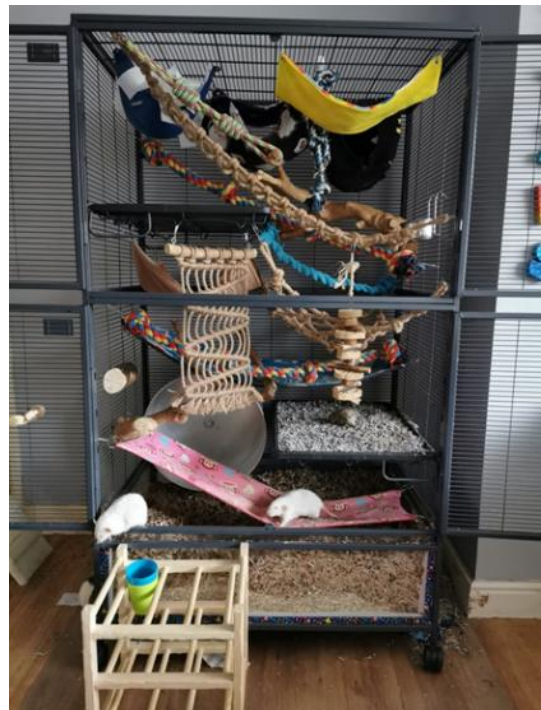
Provide a suitable and stimulating living environment



Rats are extremely curious and enjoy exploring their environment, they are fantastic climbers and will use all the space within an enclosure. Providing your rats with a suitably sized enclosure that allows for lots of enrichment is incredibly important. The minimum size requirements for up to 12 rats are **5ft x 3ft x 2ft (H x D x W)** or **152cm x 90cm x 60cm**. They will need access to a secure supervised area outside their enclosure to roam and play in. Please ask the Small Animals Team for recommendations on appropriate enclosures.

An enriching rat enclosure will have:

- A safe bedding: our recommendations are below
- Multiple hides with a suitable bedding material (strips of cloth or newspaper)
- Enrichment such as hammocks, branches, ropes, ledges, tubes, baskets, safe toys
- A wheel measuring at least 40cm in diameter
- Dig box filled with a safe substrate
- Litter tray (optional)
- A food and water bowl; water bowls are recommended over bottles as they allow for natural drinking and are easier to clean.



Bedding recommendations:

- Shredded cardboard, such as EcoBale or Bedkind
- Paper-based bedding, such as Back to Nature or Carefresh
- Kiln-dried, dust-extracted woodchip bedding, such as Pillow Wad
- Hemp bedding, such as Aubiose
- Coco fibre (should be kept slightly damp to avoid dust)
- Fleece or towels

We recommend avoiding most wood shavings or sawdust as these are known to cause respiratory issues in small animals, cotton wool-style bedding should also be avoided as it can cause blockages if ingested. Please also avoid using enrichment made of compressed wood shavings as these are dangerous if consumed. If you would like any recommendations, please contact the Small Animals Team.



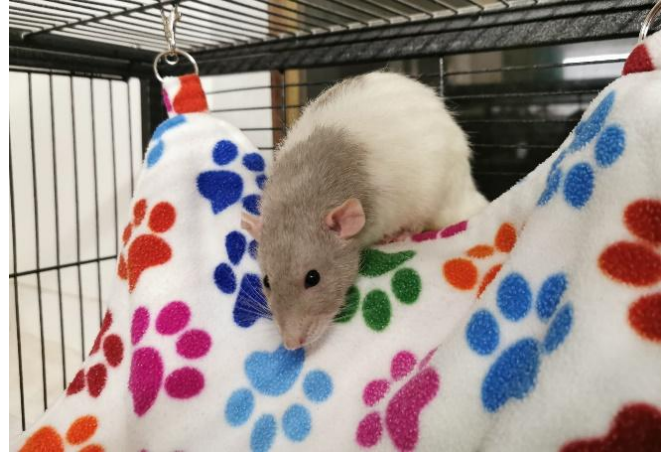
Preserve their health by protecting them from pain, injury, and disease



Rats can be prone to several illnesses. To help minimise the risk of any of these illnesses you should provide a good, varied diet and a high standard of hygiene. Seeking out an experienced rat-savvy vet is essential.

Check your rats for signs of injury or illness every day and seek veterinary advice if necessary.

- Check teeth and nails are not becoming overgrown.
- Check eyes are clear and bright
- Check coat and skin for signs of mites, bald patches, sores
- Check nose for discharge and for clear breathing
- Monitor faeces and urine for any changes from the norm
- Check for lumps



Common rat ailments:

Respiratory issues: Rats are very susceptible to respiratory infections. Respiratory infections are caused by bacteria. Some rats are more genetically prone to respiratory issues and even the best efforts to prevent it can fail. It is essential to maintain good husbandry to prevent and manage respiratory issues in rats. Choosing suitable bedding, ensuring to regularly clean your cage (hammocks, enrichments, and the enclosure) and keeping your rats' enclosure in a well-ventilated area will help to prevent this. Stress can cause a flare-up in respiratory issues, especially those prone to respiratory infections. It is common for new rats to have some respiratory issues in the first few days to a week of coming home. Monitoring them and taking them to a vet if it lasts more than a week is essential.

Hind Leg Degeneration (HLD): Hind leg degeneration is common in rats as they become older as their back legs begin to weaken. Rats with HLD will appear wobbly or they may be seen dragging one or both of their rear legs. Keeping your cage filled with lots of enrichment that encourages your rats to climb, and exercise can reduce the chances of this occurring. A rat with HLD will need cage modifications to help them navigate the cage. It's a good idea to add more hammocks to reduce falling distances and to remove enrichment that is harder to climb. You will also need to ensure food and water sources are easy to reach.



Provide a nutritious diet and fresh water



It is important to provide rats with a well-balanced, healthy diet that meets all their needs. There are many different brands of rat food on the market including muesli mixes and pellets, we recommend diets based on the Shunamite style diet or good quality pellets such as Science Selective along with safe treats such as mealworms, dried forages, seed mixes, dog treats, egg or egg biscuit and safe vegetables or fruits.

Access to fresh water is essential to all animals. We recommend the use of a heavy ceramic water bowl, rather than water bottles, as bowls are more hygienic, allow for more efficient drinking and are less likely to malfunction or leak.



Promote natural behaviour and provide appropriate companionship

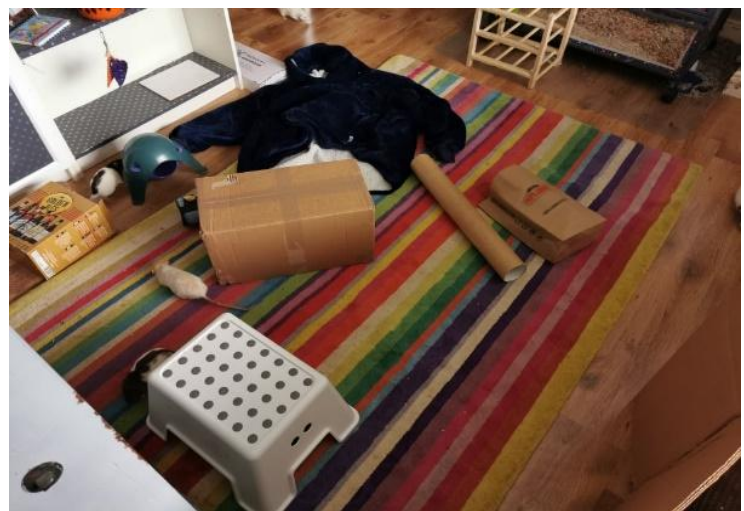


Rats are incredibly social animals that need companionship from other rats – a group of rats is called a mischief. Rats should be kept in a minimum of a pair; however, a trio is preferred. You can have mixed sex groups of rats providing any males with access to females are neutered. When bonding rats, it is important to research all methods of bonding and not to use methods that will compromise their welfare (e.g. stress bonding). However, the most successful method of bonding for rats is the carrier method. If you would like more information on rat bonding, please get in touch with the Small Animals Team. Rats can develop some behavioural problems when they reach maturity, neutering or spaying can help reduce any hormonal aggression between rats and even with owners.



Rats are scavengers by nature and love to forage for their food. Scatter feeding their food in loose bedding or hiding their food each day in different places can really enrich their lives and increase feeding time. Some rats can even be taught tricks in exchange for tasty treats! Rats are inquisitive and playful animals, changing the enrichment and placement of items in their cage can keep it more exciting for them which will help to keep the rats stimulated and encourage more natural behaviours. Bored or frustrated rats can develop stereotypic behaviours such as pacing, bar chewing and over-grooming. Providing opportunities to chew is both mentally stimulating and helps to keep your rats' teeth in good condition. As with all rodent species, rat teeth will continue to grow so providing them with something tough to chew will reduce the chance of dental problems. Chews can include safe branches (apple, pear, hazel, willow, hawthorn etc) and other wooden enrichment.

Rats should be allowed time outside their cage in a free roam space whilst being supervised. This can be provided in a dedicated rat-proofed room or in a secure pen. You can make the free roam space fun by providing lots of different enrichment. Enrichment does not need to be expensive; cardboard boxes, cat tunnels or towers, children's stools and old CD or wine racks can provide lots of enrichment for your rats.



Some rats enjoy human interaction, and this can also be an important form of enrichment. Ensure that the rat's body is supported when handling, if your rat is nervous of handling then this can be started within their playpen until they gain confidence.