

# Rats



Rats are cuddly, friendly and intelligent pets. They are reasonably easy to keep healthy, making them an ideal pet for young families.

Rats have only gained popularity as pets in the past hundred years or so. These wonderful little creatures are reasonably easy to keep healthy, which makes them a good first pet for a young family. They are still a serious responsibility, of course. Like any pet, they depend on their human keepers for everything: food, housing, warmth, medical care, and entertainment.

## ESSENTIAL EQUIPMENT

Your basic enclosure for your rats will probably be either a cage or an aquarium tank. Wire cages with solid floors are best. For adult rats, a cage designed for a ferret or a Guinea pig will be the right size. Of course, Guinea pig cages will only work if the top is enclosed, and not all of them are. Unlike Guinea pigs, rats can climb very well. Remember: Rats are intelligent. You'll be amazed at what they can escape from. If you choose a fish tank, be sure the screen cover attaches securely. Also, be sure to clean it thoroughly a few times a week. Glass tanks don't have good ventilation, and ammonia build-up from your rat's urine will make a tank a very unhealthy place in just a few days.

The bedding materials you choose for your rats can make the difference between a long, healthy life for your pets and a short, sickly one. It's that important. Avoid any bedding made from softwood. Cedar shavings, spruce shavings, and pine shavings are all bad. Birch is bad, too. Never, ever use them in your pet's enclosures. Instead, choose paper-based cat litters, shredded paper, paper towel, non-clumping corncob litter, or aspen shavings if you must use wood. Clumping litters should be avoided for the same reason they should not be used for kittens: sometimes litter gets swallowed and clumping litter expands in the stomach.

## **EXERCISE**

Rats need to explore. Within the cage, give your little guys boxes and tubes to crawl in and parrot-ladders to climb. In fact, the parrot section of your local pet-store probably has a wide assortment of fun toys and puzzles for your rats. Ferret toys are also good.

Some rats enjoy an exercise wheel and some don't. If you decide to buy one for your pet, be sure it is a large one. Most of them are too small for rats. If he needs to bend his back at all, it is too small. If it is made of wire, it is unsafe because feet and tails will get caught in the gaps. There are a few solid-plastic wheels suitable for rats.

## **FEEDING**

Your rats need to have fresh, clean water available all the time. The usual sipper bottles sold for rodents are perfect. Keep an extra on hand, however, in case your rat gnaws through the plastic.

As a rodent, your rats have incisor teeth that grow continuously. These little guys need to have something to chew on, to wear the teeth down. Chew-toys designed for parrots are good for this. So are those "Milk-bone" type of dog-biscuits which are designed to clean the dog's teeth. Some rats like dog chewies such as the ones made from pig-ears and beef bones.

For the actual meals for your rats, your safest bet is to use a lab-rat food-block and a bowl of grain mix as the base of your rodent's diet. Add pieces of fresh fruit, raw or cooked vegetables, and bits of left-over meat from your own meals, breakfast cereal, and spoon full of hummus and yogurt, bits of cheese, and so on. If it is a healthy snack for you, it's probably a healthy snack for your rat. The one to watch is peanut butter. Either mix it with butter to make it less sticky or spread it thinly on something else. Otherwise, the little guy might choke. There's probably not a rat on the face of the planet that will turn down a piece of peanut butter cookie.