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This handout is intended to provide only very general guidelines. Consult with your veterinarian about other aspects of advanced care that can be considered to ensure adequate health.

General Information

Rats are social, inquisitive, and intelligent animals that make great companions. Rats do well when kept together in pairs, however, sometimes they may fight and need to be separated into their own cages. Males should not be kept with females unless they are neutered because they breed readily and produce many offspring.

Lifespan

The average lifespan of a pet rat is 2-3 years.

Housing

Rats require a solid bottom wire cage at least three feet long and two feet wide with plenty of ventilation. Rats urinate and defecate a lot so their cage should be cleaned at least twice weekly. Carefresh (recycled shredded paper) bedding is preferred to use at the bottom of the cage and should be piled at least 1-2 inches deep to encourage natural digging and nesting behaviors. Cardboard, wooden chews, grass hay, newspaper, and other destructible toys (avoid plastic) provide enrichment. Only ceramic or metal dishes should be used for food and water can be kept in a container attached to the side of the cage.

Diet

A rodent ration containing 12-16% protein and 4-6% fat, either in pellet or block form should be offered daily. Avoid commercially available seed-based diets as they predispose your rat to obesity and nutritional deficiencies. The diet may be supplemented with small amounts of fresh fruit, raw vegetables, and freshly washed salad greens. Other occasional treats may include low sugar cereals, plain popcorn, dry oatmeal, cooked pasta, cheese or whole-wheat bread.

Common Medical Conditions

Upper respiratory infections

- These are very common in rats and are often caused by bacteria like mycoplasma and the virus Sialodacryoadenitis (SDA).
- Signs include sneezing, red tinged nasal and eye discharge, decreased appetite, and increased breathing rate.

Mammary tumors

- Common in both male and female rats and can occur almost anywhere on the body despite arising from mammary tissue
- These tumors are generally benign, however they can get quite large rather quickly
- Surgical removal is often successful, but rats are notorious for chewing at their stitches after surgery

References

Animal Hospital in Centennial, CO. Aurora Animal Hospital. (n.d.). <https://www.auroraanimalhospital.com/>
For Exotic Animal Veterinary Medicine Professionals. LafeberVet. (2025, April 25). <https://lafeber.com/vet/>