

Feeding your pet rat

Rats can make wonderful pets, partly because they are so easy to look after! Rats are designed to eat plants, eg seeds, roots, nuts and fruit.

The cheek teeth of the rat are more like our own than the teeth of rabbit or guinea pigs. They don't keep growing throughout the animal's life, but like ours, they erupt when the animal is young and have to last it all its life. The incisors are constantly growing and wearing against each other to form the characteristic chisel shape. Rats like to gnaw to keep their teeth in trim and because their natural diet would demand it; do not chop or grate vegetables too finely but let them gnaw pieces off themselves.

What should I feed my rat?

There are some very good rat mixes on the market. You should always supplement your rat's diet with a good selection of fresh food including fruits and vegetables, pieces of hard-boiled egg, cheese, they will even eat the dregs from your yoghurt pot!

How do I know if the mix is a good one?

Firstly look at the label; the protein level should be in the mid- to high-teens (15-18%), and some of that should be animal protein. Mixes that are predominately seeds and peanuts will make the rat fat but unhealthy. Make sure the pack is within its sell-by date. Secondly look at the mix; it should smell fresh and not be dusty. It is better to buy a packaged mix rather than a loose mix from a large bin - this will ensure freshness.

Can I give my rat treats?

Yes you can. If you know a treat would be good for you, it will also be good for your rat. So, if you eat a healthy diet, anything you consider to be healthy for you will be healthy for your rat. Try to avoid food that is very sweet, fatty or salty. However, it is very easy to produce a fat rat as they are so much smaller than us- one peanut provides a great proportion of their calories for the day. Seeds and nuts should therefore be kept to a minimum - 1 or 2 peanuts and sunflower seeds per day.

Do I have to feed a commercial mix?

A good commercial mix has been well thought out and provides all the nutrients the rat needs for a long and healthy life. Many pet rats are fed on the same food as their owners, and seem to be remarkably healthy. Some people even alter their shopping habits to keep their rats on a healthy diet! A rat that starts the day with a bowl of cereal, some toast and a bit of fruit, and has bread, fruit and vegetables to nibble during the day, and shares your supper at night could live a long and healthy rat life!

Can I feed my pet rat the sort of pellets fed to laboratory rats?

Yes, they are excellent. Laboratory rats have to be fit and well, and the pellets they are fed are a balanced diet.

Can poor diet lead to disease in rats?

Obesity in pet rats is a known problem. Plenty of exercise with limited access to chocolate biscuits and high fat seeds will prevent this problem. Wild rats have evolved to be survivors, and can survive even on a poor diet, but there is no doubt that a good and varied diet makes for a healthy pet rat, with increased resistance to disease.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your pet please contact The Veterinary Hospital, Plymouth on 01752 702646 and we will be happy to advise you.