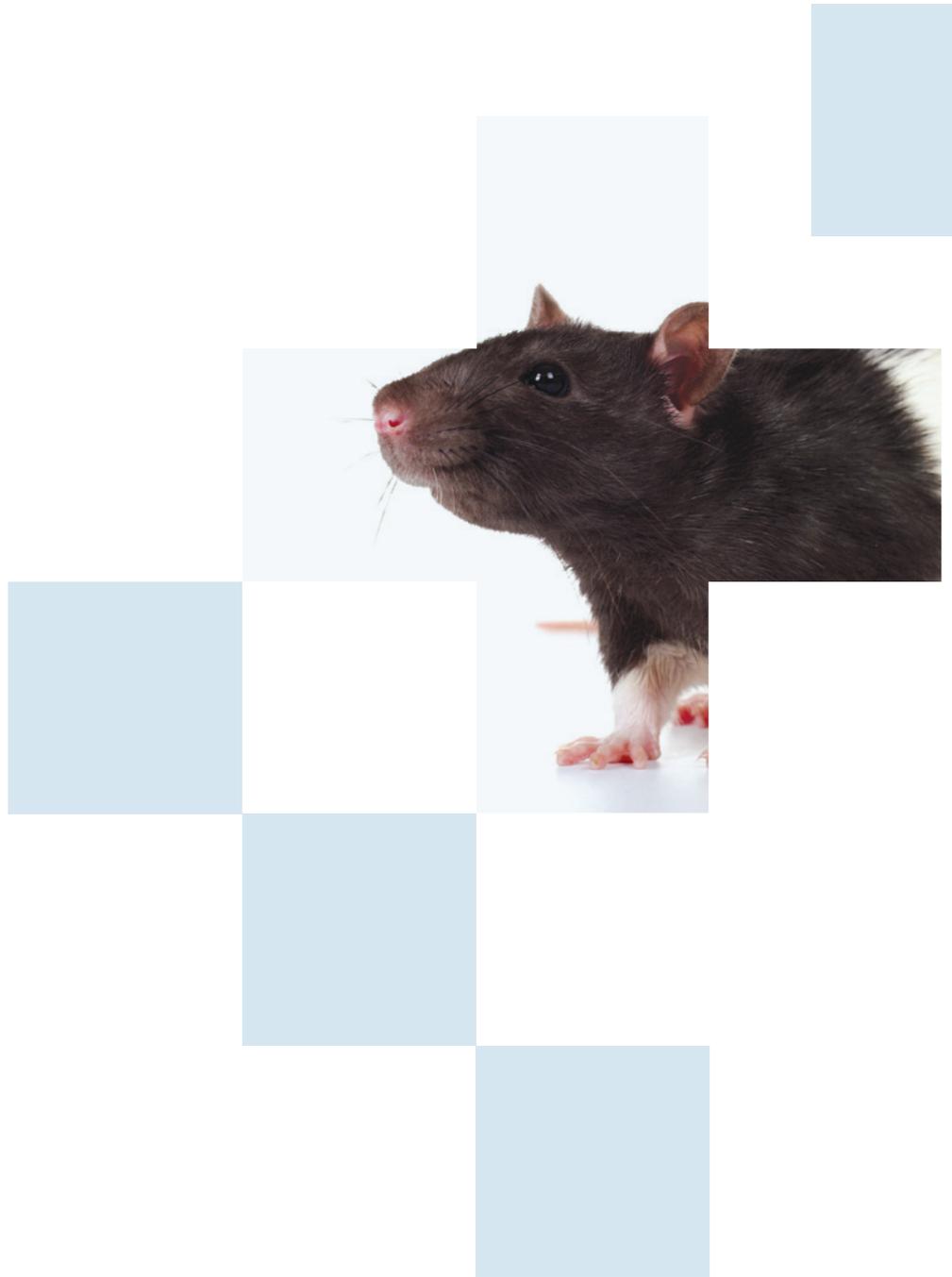


General Practice Service  
Willows Information Sheets

# Looking after your rat





## Looking after your rat

### General

There are around 30 varieties of 'fancy' rat in a range of coat types, colours and markings. These domesticated rats are descendants from the common, wild brown rat.

Well kept rats live on average for 2 to 3 years. They are clean, lively, intelligent and inquisitive social creatures that like to live in groups with other rats and bond well with humans. To prevent unwanted breeding, rats should be kept in single sex pairs or small groups. Ideally, the group should consist of litter mates as they get on the best.

## Housing

Rats need a spacious, multi-level metal cage or a glass or plastic tank. Cages should have a deep plastic base rather than a wire base which could damage feet. Tanks need a wire mesh lid with small holes for ventilation. Remember that rats have very strong incisor teeth and can chew their way through wood.

Rats need lots of space and the more that you can provide for them the better. For two rats, cages or tanks should be at least 60cm long x 30cm wide x 30cm high. Allow an extra 30cm for each additional rat.

The cage or tank should be placed in a well ventilated warm room away from draughts and direct sunlight or heat. Keep your rats away from constant noise (e.g. the hum of a fridge freezer) or loud noise (e.g. TVs or music systems). It is not a good idea to keep rats in a child's bedroom as they are most active at night and are likely to keep your child awake.

Use your imagination to make the cage or tank more interesting for your rats. It should look like a cross between a crèche and an assault course! Rats like to climb, so it is a good idea to provide different levels with shelves. Untreated apple wood branches and natural ropes are great for climbing and gnawing. Cardboard tubes and egg boxes can be used for hiding, climbing and gnawing. Plastic yoghurt pots or flower pots are also good for climbing on or hiding in. You'll also find that there are lots of toys available for rats.

Activity wheels should be solid and wide. Wheels with spokes can trap limbs and cause injury. The wheel should be big enough that your rat's back doesn't bend.

Ideally, there should be as many nesting or sleeping areas as there are rats. Separate nesting areas can be provided in cardboard or plastic boxes where the rats can hide out of sight to sleep. Some rats like to sleep on hammocks or on or under the shelves in their cage.

## Bedding

Respiratory disease is common in rats. Selecting the right type of bedding can help to reduce respiratory problems. Wood shavings, sawdust and sand should be avoided. Cedar and pine wood shavings contain phenol whilst sawdust and sand tend to be dusty. Phenol and dust are both respiratory system irritants.

Line cages or tanks with newspaper and use shredded paper or cardboard, commercially available recycled paper bedding or hemp bedding.

The ideal bedding for nesting is shredded clean white paper (e.g. kitchen paper) and soft hay. Avoid fluffy bedding such as cotton wool, as it can wrap around limbs or cause impactions in the stomach if eaten.

Soiled areas of bedding should be cleaned out daily and the whole cage or tank should be cleaned out completely each week.

## Feeding

Fresh water must be provided daily from a drip feed bottle with a metal spout.

Feed a good quality rat mix or an all in one complete pellet food. Rats are omnivores and like to eat a whole range of foods. Provide small pieces of fresh fruit (not citrus fruit) and vegetables, and even cooked meat. Feed small amounts of fresh food frequently and remove uneaten food daily. Rats are prone to obesity so it is important to avoid too many high fat or sugary human treats.

Gnawing is important to wear down incisor teeth. Dog biscuits (based on egg and oatmeal without meat derivatives), gnawing blocks or untreated apple wood are good for this.

Foraging behaviour can be encouraged by hiding food in cardboard tubes and under pots.

## Handling

Rats are easily tamed with quiet, gentle handling and they rarely bite unless scared. Children should only handle them under close adult supervision.

Let your rats get accustomed to your hand first of all. Stroke them gently and offer them pieces of food. Let them investigate and step onto your hand. Once your rats are happy with this, you can gently scoop them up with both hands. Approach them from the front, not from above, and do not approach them in their sleeping compartment. Hold your rats firmly but not too tightly. Always take care to avoid any potential falls, as even a small drop can cause serious injury. Rats should **never** be picked up by their tails.

If your rat bites you and is holding on to your finger, be brave and gently lower the rat on to a flat surface where it will let go. Do not try to pull it off (it will bite harder) and do not flick it off (it will be seriously hurt).

## Health matters

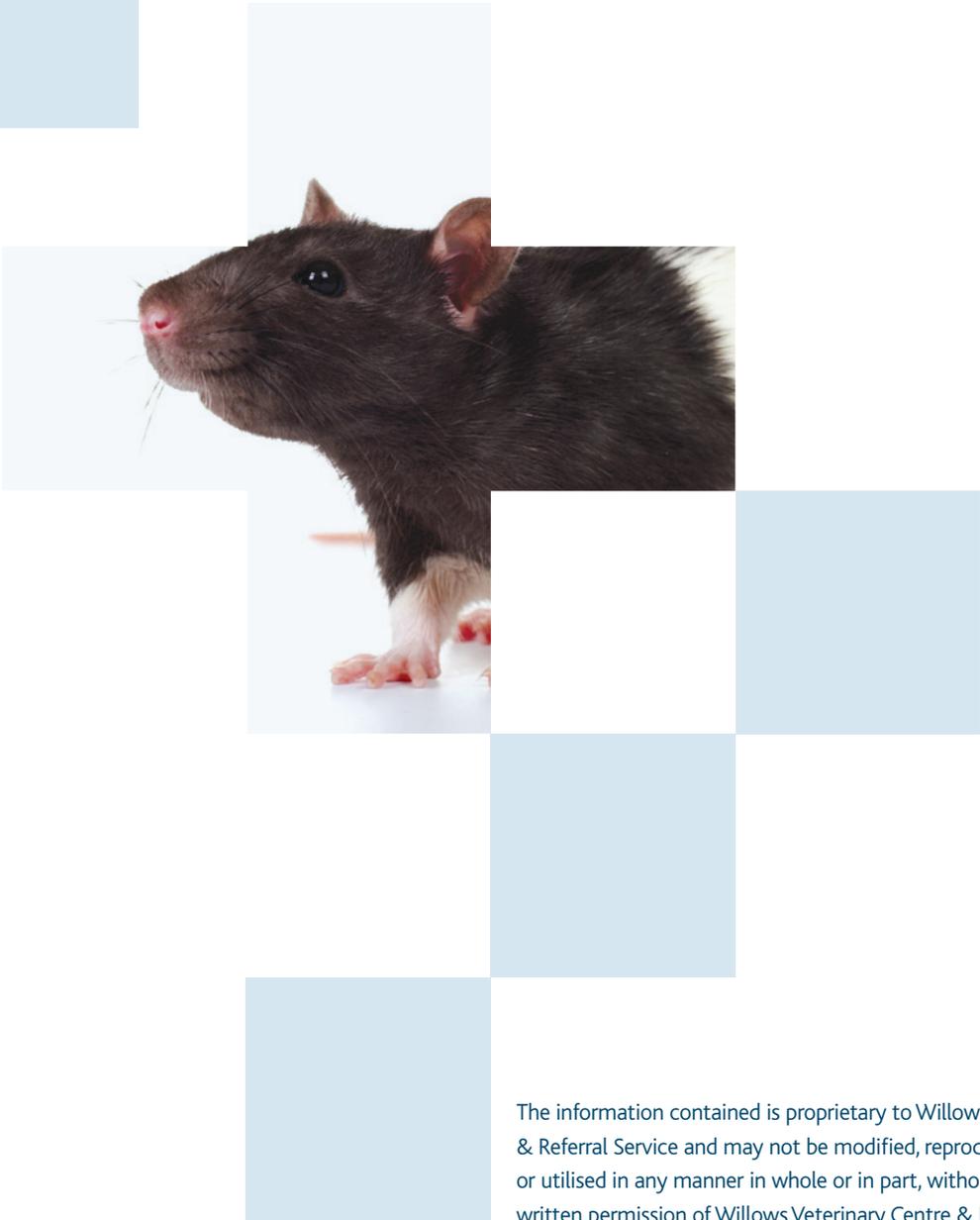
Check your rats daily. They should be alert, bright eyed and active. There should be no discharge around their eyes, ears, mouth and nose or under their tails. They should have quiet, regular breathing with no sneezing. Their coats should be glossy with no bald patches. There should be no lumps or bumps and their nails and teeth shouldn't be overgrown.

Health problems that rats suffer from include:

- Respiratory infections
- Middle ear disease
- Mites, lice and ringworm
- Damaged limbs, tails and backs from falling or getting caught in housing
- Overgrown nails and incisor teeth
- Tumours

***If you have any concerns about your rats, then please don't hesitate to [contact us](#).***

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