

# Rats and Mice

## Feeding

Both rats and mice are omnivorous (they eat everything!). This allows for a wide range of foods to be offered. Commercially, most pet mouse and rat foods are offered as 'mixes' comprising such items as seeds, nuts, grains, pulses, cereals, dried fruits, etc. These don't work well: the rats and mice just eat the bits they like best and leave the healthier foods behind. Most pet rats and mice fed on these diets are overweight. Feeding pellets removes this selective feeding.

To supplement their diet, as well as encourage behavioural enrichment, offer high fibre fresh foods such as **vegetables** (aim for 20-30% of total diet). These can include broccoli, cabbage, brussels sprouts, endive, carrots, bok choy/other Asian greens, celery, parsley, berries, beans, peas, etc.

Smaller amounts of **fruits** can also be offered apples, pears, bananas, melons, stone fruits, citrus fruits, berries, tomatoes, etc.

**Treats** should only be offered in **very small amounts!** These are: cereals, grains, seeds, breads, biscuits, sweets, cooked pasta and rice, breakfast cereals, chocolate!

## Housing

Rats and mice are mostly housed totally indoors.

**Minimum cage heights** for rats and mice are 38cm and 20cm respectively.

All enclosures should be well **ventilated**. The build up of **ammonia** from decomposing soiled litter can irritate eyes and airways. Appropriate ventilation is vital to prevent drastic temperature and humidity changes in their microclimate. Glass and plastic fish tanks are largely inappropriate due to problems with ventilation and lack of air exchange. Wire type bird cages (wire mesh in all walls and ceiling are more ideal). Cages are often manufactured with **wire floors** which can damage feet so a solid flooring with bedding is recommended.

Suitable **bedding** for rats and mice can include shredded paper, soft tissue paper, paper pellets, etc. Avoid aromatic shavings as they may be toxic and cause respiratory problems. All bedding materials should be changed regularly – especially when they become soiled or wet.

All enclosures should be located in a dry and draught free area and be protected from possible predator attack.

Rats and mice are vulnerable to **heat stress**, so appropriate heat protection must be offered. Ideally house rats and mice should be kept within the **temperature range 18-26°C**. A suitable relative **humidity range is 30-70%**.

Provide drinking water by means of **water bottles** (rather than bowls). It is important to check their water supply daily, especially for mice.

## Exercise and environmental enrichment:

Providing behavioural enrichment is very important for rats and mice. Some suggestions on providing behavioural enrichment are:

Rats and mice like to hide and burrow. Facilities should be provided to allow them to hide if frightened, escape light, or to retire to during periods of rest. Items such as cardboard or wooden boxes, plastic pipes/tunnels/igloos or thick layers of shredded paper can be used for this purpose.

Items to gnaw can provide enrichment as well as aid in maintenance of incisor teeth health, for example, indigestible nylon 'bones'.

Exercise wheels can be provided for both rats and mice. Many construction designs of these are inappropriate and may lead to injury of limbs and tail. One superior design is the 'Wodent Wheel' (<http://www.trasoniq.com/>) that provides a solid running surface without pinch areas.

Diet can play an important role in behavioural enrichment (see notes on feeding).

Food treats can be offered as a means of enrichment in both species. Just remember to keep the portions as 'treat' sized (they are very small so treats must be TINY!).

Provide and 'rotate' different toys and furnishings. For example, hammocks and plastic chains can be suspended from cage tops.

Allow the pet mouse or rat to have daily free reign exercise (in a rat/mouse proof/safe area).

Daily interaction and handling is also encouraged.

## Housing with other animals

Rats and mice are fairly sociable animals so housing them with their fellow rats or mice is encouraged.

However, appropriate groupings should be sought as aggression and fighting may occur with some mixes. Some species specifics with respect to grouped housing includes:

### **Rats**

Generally, females are compatible, unless introduced at later life stages.

Male rats are mostly compatible – especially if raised together.

Introducing foreign male rats together will likely result in fighting.

A mix of neutered/intact males and females can be made.

### **Mice**

Generally, females are compatible, unless introduced at later life stages.

Male mice generally fight unless they are litter mates raised together without females.

Male mice may be housed alone or with female(s).

Housing rats and mice together or with other species is not recommended. This is due to possible interspecific disease transmission or aggression.