

Feeding your pet rat

Rats make wonderful pets, partly because they are so easy to look after! Rats are designed to eat plants, eg seeds, roots, nuts and fruit, but they also need some meat or dairy products in the diet as well.

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. This suggest that the rat is not a 'herbivore' like the guinea pig and rabbit, but an 'omnivore', an animal that needs to eat meat and vegetables.

What should I feed my rat?

There are some very good rat mixes on the market, but the less good ones tend not to contain any meat or dairy products. 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, meat, 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. Make sure the pack is within its sell-by date, so any added vitamins have not gone off. 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.

Do I have to feed a commercial mix?

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, biscuits, fruit and vegetables to nibble during the day, and shares your supper at night could live a long and healthy rat life! If you choose not to feed a commercial mix, it is important to make sure your rat has a balanced diet to prevent obesity and other diseases. Your vet will be able to provide you with the advice you need.

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. The main problem with these pellets is that they often contain fishmeal, so many people find they are rather smelly to have around the house!

Can poor diet lead to disease in rats?

There are no specific diet related problems in rats and it is rare for rats to need to see a vet about diet problems. 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 small animal please contact Hampden Veterinary Hospital on 01296 423666 and we will be happy to advise you.