FANCY RATS AS PETS

Fancy rats are among the most intelligent domestic pets. Species-appropriate keeping requires a lot of time and thorough knowledge of the individual needs of these active and inquisitive animals.

In brief

• **Life expectancy:** 18 months to 3 years.
• **Where to get them:** Give a nice new home to rats from an animal sanctuary or rescue centre. From an animal welfare standpoint, purchasing from a pet store or other commercial source is not an option!
• **Rats are unsuitable for children under ten.**
• **Keeping:** These highly social animals should always be kept at least in pairs. A small group of varying ages is most suitable for this species. The attention of humans can never replace the company of fellow rats!
• **Breeding:** Rats are already capable of breeding when just five weeks old. Males should be neutered as soon as possible, and until then should be separated from females. Females are capable of becoming pregnant again just 24 hours after giving birth.
• **Scent:** Both males and females scent-mark territory, food and sleeping locations.

• **Time:** Looking after rats takes a considerable amount of time, and should not be underestimated.
• **Allergies:** Rat hair and bedding can trigger allergies in humans.
• **Holidays:** Before you get rats, make appropriate arrangements as to where and how they will be looked after when you go away on holiday.
• **Costs:** There are always costs involved in keeping animals: the enclosure and its equipment, food, bedding and vet fees (fancy rats tend to develop tumours: treatment is both necessary and expensive!).
• **Fancy rats are not cuddly toys!**

Creating the right habitat

• **Rats need to run about outside their cage every day,** to satisfy their need for exploration and movement (keep electric cables and poisonous plants out of the way).
• **The enclosure or cage should be in a quiet and bright place,** away from draughts, strong sources of heat, and cigarette smoke. Furthermore, there should be no electronic equipment such as a TV, computer or hi-fi in the room where the rats live, as they can hear the ultrasound emitted from such devices.
• The cages usually sold in stores are inadequate. Two to four rats will need an enclosure with a floor area of at least one square metre and a height of 150 cm.
• It is essential to provide rats with the opportunity to climb, play, hide and gnaw.
• The enclosure should be equipped so as to offer variety, and should be split into several levels.
• Rats need places to sleep and be quiet, and must always have access to nesting material (e.g. straw, toilet paper).
• Suitable equipment includes: climbing ropes made of coconut fibres or hemp, hammocks, natural twigs, flowerpots and large wooden tubes (no plastic!).
• **NOT suitable:** exercise wheels, tube systems for small rodents, hamster wadding or bits of cloth.
• To keep the rats’ habitat interesting for them, change the layout and equipment from time to time.

For more information, consult specialist literature on the correct way to keep these animals.

---

**Above:** Hollowed tree trunks are ideal as hiding places and for nibbling.

**Centre:** Rats need lots of fresh fruit and vegetables.

**Below:** Shallow bowls are not suitable for small animals, as food and water quickly become contaminated.