



MICE and RATS

MICE AND RATS are the 'pocket pets', and are classified as rodents. The word rodent makes many people think of pointed snouts, sharp teeth, beady eyes, and germs. All rodents do have sharp teeth and they need them to gnaw the hard foods that are their basic diet. However, they rarely bite humans unless frightened or hurt.

For small animals, rodents are particularly smart. As for germs, rodents get them mostly from us. Well adjusted they are to sharing human food - in the form of both stored food and leftover garbage - wild rodents pick up and carry about the germs our discards provide. Pet rodents don't get a chance to sample the local dump or live near sewers, so they are particularly clean. The mice and rats now sold as pets come to us by way of the laboratory, thousands of generations removed from the wild. They are easy to care for and to handle. As for 'pockets', the reason mice and rats like them so much has to do with their normal way of life. Mice and rats are nocturnal dwellers in holes and burrows. Pockets are simply snug dark holes, obviously safe places for short naps.

CHOOSING YOUR PET: First of all you have to decide whether you want a mouse or rat. Mice are perhaps the sweetest looking but rats are far more intelligent and social. Otherwise they are similar in needs and are easy to care for.

Mice and rats are sold from 4 weeks of age. Look for a lively, alert animal, plumpness, clear eyes, a sheen to the coat, and check under the tail for signs of diarrhoea. A good, calm, curious baby rat should certainly come and investigate your hand when you reach into the cage. Mice, on the other hand, will scramble away. Mice, being the smallest of the 'pocket pets', are the cutest. White mice are most common but black, brown, apricot, grey and a combination of all these colours are available. Life span is about two years. Rats, which don't smell as mice do, generally come as albinos or black and white hooded rats although some black or cream colours are sometimes available. Their life span reaches between two and four years.

DIET: In the wild these animals eat from nature's remarkable delicatessen which, as well as the basic seeds and grains, may include fresh vegetables, bark, and assorted gleanings from garbage pails. Suitable mixtures are available at your local pet shop. Rice and cereals from the kitchen can also be given. This dry mix should be supplemented with snacks from the kitchen or your own meals such as bacon rinds, vegetable peelings, fresh corn on the cob, spinach, bits of fruit, etc. Given a choice, a pocket pet knows what to eat to avoid malnutrition. There is also a great range of treats available from your local pet shop. Avoid giving sweet treats such as biscuits and fruit loops.

By watching what your pet prefers to eat and continuing to feed those snacks, you can keep it on a balanced diet. A water bottle is the best way to keep drinking water available. They have a slightly bent nozzle and the best ones have a ball bearing behind the opening. You are more likely to find a ball bearing type bottle labelled as bird or guinea pig bottle. Plants such as chickweed, clover and dandelion leaves are all readily taken and are good general tonics.

HOUSING: A suitable cage can often be purchased from your pet shop, or a glass aquarium secured at the top with strong weldmesh is a great alternative. These must be an adequate size to take your pet and his playthings and bedding. The floor covering can range from clean, dry sawdust to cat litter, wood shavings, sand, peat moss, or any other clean, non-toxic absorbent material. You can give your pet a nesting box or a hide to sleep in. Always add some paper towels or cloth for your pet to chew up for nest building.

CARE: Check the food supplies daily and do not be fooled by what looks like a full dish - often it is only empty shells and there is really no food left. Rodents eat a high percentage of their body weight every day because their hot bodies and active nature require that much fuel. There should be a supply of dry mix and clean water available at all times. Before you clean your pet's cage, take out the animal and put it into a back tub or another cage. Wash the cage out with detergent and water, rinse it well and dry it. Wash the water bottle and food dish. Put in fresh bedding and add new nesting material, if necessary.

Remember, next to a good diet and clean water, a clean cage is the most important thing for your pet's health. It is his home, so keep it clean. Try to avoid the cage becoming too damp, too hot, too cold or being in a draught, and keep it out of direct sunlight. If your pet shows signs of diarrhoea, cease all fresh/moist foods until the diarrhoea has cleared and then gradually start your animals back on fresh foods. Never pick up a mouse or rat by the end of its tail, always pick the up by the base of the tail or cradle them in your hand.

TAMING: Mice and rats are easy to tame and can be taught many tricks (especially rats) which will provide hours of fun for the owner and something to show off to friends. Once it is tamed, your pet must be kept tamed. Begin to tame when young as adults are more difficult. Just regular daily handling is all that is needed, in fact, essential. The owner and pet should first become thoroughly accustomed to each other; then introduce gradually to as many friends as possible.

N.B A bite from your pet (which is unlikely once tamed) is non-poisonous and should therefore be treated as one would a small cut. Be aware of the fact that mice and rats are not afraid of cats, so watch puss.

Mice and rats always seem to be able to make their own fun, whether it be running in and out of their own nest boxes, chasing each other, playing with nuts, or simply remaking their nests - but toys are greatly appreciated as extras. The ladder and the play wheel are among the most popular. The idea of supplying mere playthings has a logical sequel: educational toys. Starting with simple tricks, at the end of which the pets gets his inevitable reward, one can progress to problems of reasonable complexity, which impose on the animal the need to learn, make decisions and to remember (rats are better at these than mice).

Remember, this leaflet gives only basic information. To find out more about your pet ask your pet store to recommend suitable books.

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