

RAT CARE: FEEDING AND NUTRITION



by Victoria Johnson

Water

Clean/Fresh water should be provided for rats at all times.

- Plastic bottles are most common, but if glass bottles are available, bacteria build up will decrease and they can be easier to clean.
- Make sure bottles do not leak.
- If smaller water bottles are used, hang two or more in the cage if the mischief is medium to large in number.
- If using a bowl for water, it should be raised up to prevent bedding from getting in the water and should be changed frequently (minimum daily if not at least twice a day as rats dirty them up quickly).
- Clean bottles with vinegar and water approximately every week.

Food

Use of a balanced, well-made rat food (ideally lab blocks or pellets) is very important for the health of rats. A few good brands to use are:

- Oxbow Essentials Adult Rat Food
- Science Select Rat and Mouse Food
- Mazuri Rat Food

If a rat(s) is getting overweight, look at the type of food it is getting, the amount, frequency, and type of treats that are being given. Also look to be sure room for exercise is present or they are getting enough other forms of exercise. Barn Hunt is not the only form of exercise a rat needs.

Have at least one or two food bowls per cage depending on the number of rats (one bowl per four rats is a good rule of thumb).

Foraging for food is a fun activity for rats. Spreading a little food/treats around in the cage or free-roaming enclosure is enriching. This is not encouraged if a cage is in need of cleaning due to pee/poop in the bedding. If a litter box is used or if a cage is freshly cleaned, it is a good enrichment activity.

Feeding

Rats must be fed daily as their high metabolism requires frequent access to food in order for their bodies to function properly and stay healthy. They typically eat about 10 – 20% of their bodyweight a day with 12 – 16% of it being protein. If rats do not get enough food with good ingredients, their bodies will not function well and they will become weak, sick, and more prone to injury. Weight fluctuation is normal and adjusting food amounts based off activity level is normal too. If rats are working extra hard, providing a little more food/protein is acceptable

- Change food daily to keep the food fresh.
- Store food in air-tight containers to prevent from going stale or from bugs gaining access.
- Clean food bowls regularly or at least once a week when cage cleaning.

Scheduled feeding

Many owners opt for meal times of once or twice a day. Calculate the appropriate amount of food for the size and number of rats per cage (see Food Amount section below) that should be eaten in a day and split it up for meal times.

NEVER SKIP A FULL DAY OF FOOD/FEEDING

Research on fasting rats has shown little to no benefit. The practice of having rats fast every other day should be avoided as it will lead to malnutrition, stress, increased likelihood of health problems, strain on the heart, muscle weakness, etc.

Free Feeding

Many rats self-regulate with how much they eat. Free feeding with no set amount of food (just a full bowl at all times) can be an option for self-regulating rats. For rats that do not regulate food intake well, calculating the appropriate amount of food for the size and number of rats per cage for each day and filling the bowl for free feeding with that amount is recommended.

Food Amount

Most pre-made foods will state feeding instructions (Oxbow does not); it is most often calculated by rat weight.

- A good general rule of thumb is to feed each rat about the size of their head each day.
- A common formula (variable based on individual brand and food content) is 5-6 grams of food per 100 grams of rat weight per day. For most rats, this will be 15-25 grams of food per day which is 1/4 to 1/3 cup a day per rat.
 - If the rat is 500 grams, it would need approximately 25 grams of food per day (approximately 1/3 cup depending on kibble/lab block size).
 - To feed a whole mischief, either weigh each individual rat and calculate their individual amount of food then simply add them all up and that is what is put in the food bowl per day or an average can be done if they are all fairly similar in weight.

Treats

Rats love treats. It is encouraged to use treats as a reward especially after rats work hard doing Barn Hunt. Over-treating should be avoided. It is important to know what rats can and cannot eat or what foods they should have sparingly. The below is a reference list (not all encompassing)—if in doubt about treat/food items, research should be done before giving to rats:

Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

Wash fresh fruits and vegetables (except bananas) before giving to rats. Dried versions of fruits are often loved by rats (just be cautious of mold formation once opened); make sure no lemon juice is used in the process; also check sugar coatings of dried fruits (rats should not have a lot of processed sugar).

- Apples (remove the core/seeds)
- Bananas (MUST be fully ripe; do not use green tinged bananas)
- Pears (remove the core/seeds)
- Blueberries
- Strawberries
- Cranberries
- Watermelon (in moderation—diarrhea can occur)
- Cantaloupe (in moderation)
- Cooked Peas (not raw/dried)
- Carrots (no skin)
- Broccoli
- Corn (fresh, cooked, or frozen, never dried)
- Cooked Sweet Potatoes (not raw/dried)

Seeds/Nuts (always unsalted)

Nuts/seeds should be given in moderation/sparingly.

- Pumpkin seeds
- Sunflower seeds
- Almonds (max of once-a-day treat)
- Peanuts—**not raw; must be roasted/unsalted** (NOTE: if giving whole roasted peanuts, rats will not eat the peanut shell; they will enjoy breaking the shell open and eating the nut inside; max of once-a-week treat or even more rare – discard shells after eating. Do not leave in cage.)



Meats/Proteins (in moderation)

Meat is enjoyed by rats; to prevent choking or splinters, never give bones or skin to rats. Deli meats should be avoided as they usually are high in salt content along with potentially toxic additives.

- Chicken (thoroughly cooked, plain, no additives, oils, etc.)
- Beef (thoroughly cooked, plain, no additives, salt, oils, etc. lean)
- Turkey (thoroughly cooked, plain, no additives, oils, etc.)
- Fish (small amounts, thoroughly cooked, plain, no additives, oils, etc.)
- Hard Boiled Egg (cooked properly, plain, no salt, additives, etc.)
- Cheese (in moderation – never give blue cheese)

Baby Food

Many baby foods—especially meat varieties—are great options for rats as a little treat or to hide medication in. Always check the ingredients before giving as lemon juice concentrate, artificial coloring, or other additives are sometimes added to baby food. Always research before giving if an odd ingredient is stated.

Treats/Foods to Avoid

Some treats/foods are toxic, choking hazards, or foods that mess with absorption of nutrients in rats' bodies. A list of common foods/treats to avoid is below (not all encompassing):

- Citrus fruits
- Chocolate
- Avocados
- Artificial Sweeteners
- Artificial Dyes
- Garlic
- Green Bananas (bananas should be ripe—brown spots in skin ideal-no green!)
- Lemon Juice Concentrate (often used as a preservative in foods)
- Grapes/Raisins
- Sugary Foods ex) cereal (should only be a rare treat given sparingly)
- Peanut Butter (choking hazard)
- Sticky foods (choking hazard)
- Salt
- Salt/Calcium/Mineral blocks
- Onion
- Deli Meats (too high in salt and possible toxic additives)
- Bones (raw or cooked – choking hazard and splinter hazard)
- Raw Peanuts (contain toxins that can harm the liver, brain, and cause cancer - peanuts must be roasted and unsalted if given)
- Seeds or pits from fruit
- Moldy or Spoiled food (can make them ill just like with humans)

