

Rat Has Eye And Breathing Trouble

What can be done for a rat with a red eye that scratches and sneezes a lot and has difficulty breathing?

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Q: My rat, Templeton, has an eye that looks rusty red and puffy. I think it irritates him, because he always scratches it. He sneezes a lot, too, and breathes hard all the time. Is this a serious respiratory infection, or just a minor cold? Does this need medical attention? What could I do for now? His stools are fine, and the same with his naps. He does sleep a lot though, and hardly drinks or eats. Is there any information for me to know about this?

A: Respiratory disease is very, very common in rats. Also very common in rats are infections of the tissue around the eye, more technically called conjunctivitis. Sometimes, rats have both an eye infection and a respiratory infection simultaneously.

In settings where many rats are brought together and kept in cramped surroundings, the spread of infectious disease happens very easily. Even if you just got a rat and it does not look sick when you first take him or her home, at some point — may be even months later — the signs of disease may become apparent.

To help prevent our pet rats from becoming sick with respiratory or eye infection, keep the husbandry at home as near perfect as possible. This means sufficient airflow throughout the enclosure. The bedding needs to be cleaned frequently to prevent build up of ammonia from urine and bacteria from feces. The diet needs to be appropriate for rats and the water bottle must be changed and cleaned frequently.

Based on what you have written about your rat's eye, this sounds like an infection, conjunctivitis, is present; but only a veterinarian can tell you for certain by examining the eye, especially the soft tissue around the eye. Or this could be something different like an ulcer of the cornea or even a small piece of bedding caught under an eyelid.

The sneezing and difficulty breathing certainly sound like a respiratory infection, but those could be a reaction to the environment.

The best thing to do is visit your veterinarian as soon as possible. Until you can do that, make sure the airflow is adequate, that the diet is as good as possible and the air temperature is acceptable for a rat.

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