



Basics

Rats can be a very misunderstood pets as they are often compared to their wild cousins. Domesticated rats are highly intelligent, sociable, clean, and friendly creatures. They can become very attached to their humans, can be taught to do tricks, and, if well socialized, will very rarely bite.

On average, rats live 2-3 years, although some can live 4+ years. On average female rats weigh 225g to 400g and males weigh 250g to 550g, although this can vary depending on the breeding and genetics of the rats.

Female rats are referred to as “does”, males are “bucks” and babies are “kits”. A group of rats is called a “mischief”!

Females are typically more adventurous and playful, and males are typically cuddlier and calmer; although this is more of a guideline than a rule. Many females can be cuddlier and many males can be more playful.

Be sure you adopt two or more rats, so they are not lonely. Rats are a very social animal and need the company of other rats. Without a companion, they can become very lonely and sad, and it can negatively affect their health. You can put together two or more females, two or more males, or neutered males with females.

Living Space

Buy a **large enough cage**. Typically, if you own 2 to 4 rats, you will want a cage that is at least 7 to 8 cubic feet at a minimum. If you have 5+ rats, you should then allow an additional 2 cubic feet per rat. However, a bigger cage is always better.

Wired cages should be used instead of aquariums to avoid ammonia buildup from

the rats’ urine, which can lead to respiratory problems. **Powdered wire cages** should be used as opposed to galvanized steel (which can be harmful to rats when chewed).

The cage must have a **solid bottom** (not a wire bottom) to protect rats’ fragile feet from developing bumblefoot.

Multi-level cages are best for rats as they love to climb and play.

CAGE CONTENT

BEDDING: A rat cage can be lined with **CareFRESH, paper-based litter, or cloth**. If you choose to line the cage with cloth, the best combination is an absorbent cloth as the bottom layer, with a layer of fleece on top. Be sure to use cloth that does not unravel easily, such as towels, as rat’s feet can get caught in them or they can eat the loose bits string. Bedding should be **changed at least once or twice a week**, as ammonia buildup can lead to respiratory illness in rats.

Clay-based cat litter and cedar or pine shavings are not recommended as these can be harmful to your pet rat and often lead to respiratory issues.

Supply your rat with **plenty of toys and cage accessories**. Rats teeth grow very quickly so it is important they have toys they can chew on to avoid having them overgrow. You can also make your own toys out of boxes, paper bags, folders, and more. Be creative and use materials you find around the house.

Many rats love to sleep in high places, so **hammocks** are a must. Many also love to sleep on the ground, so provide some **hides** so they have many options to get cover.

Include **small dishes for food** and a **water bottle**.



A rat can often be easily litter trained so it is recommended to include a **small litter box** filled with **paper-based litter**. This will help keep the cage cleaner for longer.

CAGE CLEANING

Clean the rats' cage thoroughly **at least once a week**. The frequency of thorough cleaning depends on the type of bedding used and the number of rats you have. Some bedding, which is less absorbent, such as fleece, may require you to change it more frequently to ensure there is no ammonium build up from the rats' urine. Spot cleaning of the cage should be done daily.

Remove all debris, liners, bedding, and wipe down all surfaces with unscented baby wipes or a solution of water and Dawn dish soap. Disinfect using a rat-friendly antibacterial/disinfectant spray or a mixture of vinegar and water. Rinse off cleaning product thoroughly, and dry.

You can dispose of old toys or clean with a rat-friendly antibacterial spray or a mixture of water and vinegar. Again, be sure to remove any excess cleaners before returning parts to the cage.

Once cleaned, you can replace the bedding and hammocks, and the rats are ready to return to their newly cleaned homes!

Dietary Needs

Rats are **omnivorous**, which means they can eat quite a wide variety of foods.

STAPLE DIET: Rats should be fed a staple diet of **high-quality lab blocks** or **rat specific pellets** (such as Oxbow Rat Food). Follow the label on the bag to determine the amount to feed them. The blocks or pellets would consist of approximately 80% of the rat's diet. **Seed mixes should be avoided** as they do not provide all the required daily nutrition for a rat.

FRUITS AND VEGETABLES: The remaining 20% of the rat's diet consists of fresh vegetables and fruit. The suggested portion for vegetables is approximately 1 to 2 teaspoons daily and for fruit, approximately ½ to 1 teaspoon daily.

Vegetables can consist of cucumber, zucchini, carrots, peas, kale, lettuce mixes, broccoli, pumpkin, etc.

Fruit can consist of blueberries, grapes, strawberry, raspberry, peach, pear, kiwi, banana, melon, etc. Note that there is some debate that oranges can cause cancer in male rats, so it is strongly recommended to avoid.

TREATS: Rats have varied diets and can eat many foods that humans do. They love to try different food items such as cooked unseasoned meats, pasta, nuts, seed, grains, eggs, etc. However, to avoid your rat from become obese, these should be given sparingly.

Examples of **unhealthy food NOT to feed** to your rats would include carbonated drinks, any fried, greasy or oily foods, and any foods that are high in fat, sugar, or sodium.

WATER: Change the water in your rat's water frequently and clean and disinfect the mouth piece of the water bottle at every cage cleaning to avoid the breeding of harmful bacteria.

Playtime and Exercise

Give your pet rat some floor time each day. Rats should have **at least 1 hours of floor time each day**. If you are in a situation where you temporarily have a lone rat, they should spend a minimum of four hours out socializing with their humans. Be sure to rat proof the free roam area, as they may be inclined to chew on wires or furniture to keep their teeth trimmed.

Make sure to have plenty of space in their exercise area so that they can run and play and include many toys and places to hide. This exercise time is crucial to your rats' happiness and will help keep them healthy.



Common Health Issues

RESPIRATORY ILLNESS: Rats are very susceptible to respiratory illness, and it is one of the most common health issues experienced in pet rats.

Almost all pet rats (except for some laboratory rats) are born with bacteria in their lungs called mycoplasma (often shortened to myco). When rats have underlying health issues, their immune system is run down, there is a buildup of ammonia in their cage from their urine, or if a rat is stressed, mycoplasma can begin to cause respiratory issues such as **sneezing, snuffling, or porphyrin staining** around the eyes and nose. This can eventually progress to more severe respiratory illness symptoms such as a **rattling or grumbling sounds** when breathing, **labored breathing, gasping, chattering, open mouth breathing, and coughing**.

If a rat begins to exhibit any of the symptoms above or if they begin to show signs of pain (see section below), be sure to visit a rat-savvy vet as soon as possible. They may need to be prescribed antibiotics to help get the problem under control.

TUMOURS AND OTHER LUMPS AND BUMPS:

Rats are also prone to developing tumours and various other types of lumps such as abscesses, cysts, etc. Some of the more common types of tumours are listed below:

Mammary tumour: Female rats are particularly prone to mammary tumours. These can grow very quickly and likely require surgical removal. These can be either benign or malignant so it is important to get an appointment with a veterinarian to have it examined. Male rats can also develop mammary tumours, however, these are much less common in males.

Pituitary tumour: Pituitary tumours are another type of tumour which are more commonly seen in female rats. However, these can also less commonly be seen in male rats. These develop

at the base of the brain and typically affect the rat's coordination and body functions.

Having your female rat spayed can greatly help reduce the chance of mammary or pituitary tumours developing in female rats.

A male rat may be neutered if you wish to house them with females, reduce the chance of testicular cancer or help address behavioural problems.

SIGNS OF PAIN: Know what to look for in an ill rat and be sure to take your rat to a savvy exotics vet for proper treatment. Always be on the lookout for even the slightest change in habits or appetite as rats are extremely good at hiding any illness. Signs of pain in rats can include behaviours or symptoms such as:

- Porphyrin around the eyes and nose
- Vocalization when prodded
- Reduced activity or appetite
- Hunched posture
- Fur raised on the rat's back
- Increase heart rate
- Laboured breathing
- Weight loss
- etc.

Bonding

BONDING WITH YOUR RAT: Interact and bond with your rats **several times daily**. Rats are an inherently social species and live in groups in the wild. Frequent handling each day is essential to your rats' happiness. Talk to them, cuddle them, carry them, and pet them as often as you can. Set aside plenty of time to play with them each day and try to have their cage in a high traffic area of the home.

A few ways to tell if your rat is happy is if you observe any of the following behaviours:

- Grooming near you or others
- Sleeping near you or others



- **Bruxing:** which is when a rat will gently grind its teeth together quickly and is done as a sign of contentment (not to be confused with teeth chattering, a sign of extreme fear or stress)
- **Boggling:** This refers to when a rat's eyes seem to move quickly in and out of their socket. The behaviour can look quite odd, which can sometimes frighten a new rat owner. However, rest assured, this happens when the rat is very happy. Bruxing and boggling can be compared to cat's purr.

RAT BONDING WITH OTHER RATS:

Introducing new rats to each other or to your mischief should be done **slowly and incrementally**. Do not put a new rat immediately into the cage with your mischief as this could lead to in-fighting and injuries.

Begin by having the rats get used to each other's scent by swapping some bedding between the cages. Eventually you can move the cages side by side with enough space between the two to avoid them reaching each other. You can also try swapping the rats cages themselves so they can grow accustomed to being in each other's territory without risk of getting injured.

Eventually, you can begin introductions in a neutral territory and observe their behaviour and reactions carefully. Keep sessions short at first and if there is little to no fights, you can increase the time. Some pinning and power grooming are expected as they try to establish dominance and determine the new pecking order. However if you observe more extreme such as sidling, chasing, fighting, and biting, you should immediately separate them (be sure to use gloves or a towel) and give the rats a break.

Once rats can have extended sessions with no incidents, you can test having them in a newly cleaned caged for a few hours. If no issues ensue, you find the rats eating and grooming, or sleeping near each other they are likely ready to share a cage. Depending on the sexes and ages of the rats the whole process can take from a week to several months.

Useful Websites

The following websites are some of for taking care of your rat!

The Rat Guide ratguide.com

Rat and Mouse Club of America rmca.org

Rat Fan Club ratfanclub.org

The Spruce Pets thesprucepets.com

Oxbow Animal Health oxbowanimalhealth.com

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us!

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