

How to Keep Your Rat Happy, Healthy and Safe

- Handle gently.
- Provide daily playtime.
- Thoroughly clean the habitat and change the substrate at least weekly. If you put your nose down at the level of the pet and you can smell ammonia, then it is too strong and the habitat should be cleaned.
- Avoid overcrowding.
- Feed a fresh, high quality pelleted diet formulated specifically for rats.
- Provide fresh water at all times.
- Monitor water bottle levels.
- Schedule frequent physical examinations in order to quickly note and treat any impending health problem.
- Check fecal pellets: they should be oval, firm and yet contain moisture. Constipation or dehydration may be indicated if stools are hard, dry and smaller than usual; illness may be present if feces are overly soft.
- Protect from falling and traumas.
- Proper housing should include:
 - » Be at least 14" x 24" x 12" (35 x 60 x 30 cm)—the bigger, the better
 - » Be made of safe, cleanable, escape-proof material
 - » Have solid flooring of plastic or metal, large enough to allow nesting, burrowing and exercise areas
 - » Include suitable substrates, such as shredded paper (non-inked), recycled newspaper composite materials or pellets, and compressed wheat straw; avoid pine, cedar and corn cob for bedding
 - » Include substrate placed at a depth of ¼–½" (0.64–1.27 cm) on the bottom of the habitat
 - » Be maintained at room temperature (65–80°F [18–26°C]) with 40–70% humidity
 - » Include a hammock, hide box or sleeping box
 - » Be located off the floor and away from windows and heating/ cooling vents
- It is important to prevent rats from accessing:
 - » Dogs, cats and ferrets without proper introduction and supervision
 - » Small children without supervision
 - » Electrical cords or wires
 - » Pesticides and other toxins
 - » Tobacco and cigarette smoke
 - » Caffeine, soda or alcohol
 - » Chocolate
 - » Pine, cedar and corn cob shavings
 - » Ammonia from a dirty cage
 - » Elevated floors or ramps made of ½" x 1" (1.27 x 2.54 cm) wire mesh
 - » Items you do not want your rat to chew
 - » Toxic houseplants
 - » Other small pet mammals and birds (which a rat can attack)
 - » Temperatures over 85°F (29°C)
 - » Wire exercise wheels

Common Disorders of Rats

It is recommended that your rat have an annual exam. Because many health problems are a result of improper feeding and housing, nutritional and husbandry counseling can prevent problems and promote a long, satisfying relationship with your pet. If you notice your rat exhibiting any of these signs or symptoms, please contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.

- **Cardiac**
 - » Congestive heart failure
 - » Atherosclerosis
 - » Hypertension
- **Dental**
 - » Fractured incisors
 - » Malocclusion
 - » Periodontitis
- **Dermatologic**
 - » Abscesses
 - » Bacterial infections
 - » Bite wounds
 - » Cutaneous lymphoma
 - » Flea
 - » Lice
 - » Mites
 - » Pododermatitis/foot infection
 - » Tail injury
- **Gastrointestinal**
 - » Bacterial
 - » Parasitic
 - » Viral
 - » Dysbiosis
- **Musculoskeletal**
 - » Fractures/trauma
 - » Osteoarthritis
 - » Skeletal muscle degeneration with aging
- **Nervous**
 - » Seizures
 - » Stroke
 - » Pituitary tumors
- **Ocular**
 - » Cataracts
 - » Conjunctivitis
 - » Corneal ulcer
 - » Keratitis
 - » "Red tears"
 - » Retinal degeneration
- **Reproductive**
 - » Infertility
 - » Mammary gland tumors
 - » Uterine prolapse
- **Respiratory**
 - » Allergic
 - » Bacterial
 - » Neoplasia
 - » Viral
- **Urinary**
 - » Hydronephrosis
 - » Kidney inflammation/infection

Resources

- **Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians** (AEMV.com)
- **Lafeber Emeraid** (lafeber.com/vet/mammal-medicine)
- **Oxbow Animal Health** (oxbowanimalhealth.com)

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How to Care for Your

Rat



To learn more, visit the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians at AEMV.com

ABOUT YOUR RAT

The most common rat species kept as a pet is the Norway rat, *Rattus norvegicus*. Free-ranging Norway rats, also known as brown rats, live in and about human habitations and on ships and have become naturalized by commerce in most parts of the world. Rats are believed to have originated in China but have spread to all continents except Antarctica. The brown rat is extremely common in Europe and much of North America, making it the most successful mammal on our planet with the exception of humans. With rare exceptions, the brown rat lives wherever humans live, particularly in urban areas. Rats sold as pets today are fully domesticated descendants of the free-ranging Norway rat.

Pet rats come in many different colors, including albino (white with pink eyes), beige, black, brown, pearl, agouti, cinnamon, Russian blue, and gold and in many different patterns, including solid (also known as self or standard), capped, hooded, Siamese, Himalayan, dalmatian and variegated. Hairless rats are a variety characterized by areas of bare skin or very short fur.

Albino rats have poor eyesight, due to retinal degeneration, although they are very sensitive to bright light. All rats rely on whiskers and scent for sensory input, sometimes weaving their head back and forth to focus on objects. Their whiskers are more sensitive to touch than the fingertips of primates.

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What to Expect from Your Pet Rat

Rats make excellent pets, being clean, quiet and easy to care for. Strong bonds can quickly be formed with these intelligent, inquisitive and affectionate animals. Because rats are so social (free-ranging rats live communally), it is best for at least two same-sex or neutered rats to live together. Single rats must receive more attention than most pet owners are willing to give.

Rats are usually very gentle and reluctant to bite unless they are frightened. Most rats will allow you to pick them up by placing your hand firmly over the back and rib cage, or by scooping them up with both hands.

Is your rat male or female?

Male rats have a large scrotum, making them easy to differentiate from female rats. Also, the distance from the anus to the genitals is roughly twice as long in male rats as in female rats. Only female rats have nipples.

Rats are very prolific breeders! Unless you plan to have on average 3–18 pups every 21–23 days it is not recommended to keep a male and female together unless one or both are neutered.

Are rats tame?

Domestic rats are born tame, but they still need socialization in order to bond to humans. Baby rats need to be handled as much as possible beginning at birth and especially between 2–4 weeks of age. It is a myth that handling the babies will cause the mother to kill them.

What do rats do all night?

Rats are mostly nocturnal, so evening is the best time to observe and interact with them. Daily attention, handling and regularly scheduled play times at least 30 minutes in length will lead to a calmer, gentler pet.

Rats need a cage large enough to provide room for toys and exercise. Rats also need a place to hide and sleep, such as a box or a hammock.

Toys are required for rats' health and well-being. Rats like to explore their surroundings and favor tubes, climbing toys, exercise wheels with solid flooring and areas to investigate. Safe items on which to gnaw, such as commercial chew sticks, pesticide-free hardwood branches and ink-free cardboard, are also necessary.

Rats thrive best in full darkness at night; nightlights or uncovered windows in their environment should be avoided.

What should you feed your rat?

Rats are omnivorous, eating both plant and animal foods. Commercially available pelleted diets made specifically for rats are adequate to meet nutritional needs. Tree nuts, such as almonds, walnuts, pecans or brazil nuts, may be offered in very small amounts as special treats once or twice a week. Rat blocks (pellets) should be offered free choice. The best treats are fresh fruits and vegetables. Avoid foods that are high in sugar and fat, as these can lead to obesity.

Fresh water should be available at all times, ideally provided via a drinking bottle. The bottle and sipper tube should be cleaned and refilled at a minimum twice weekly to be sure the sipper tube is functioning properly. Check for leaks 1 hour later.

