

Caring for your rat

**How to keep pet rats
healthy and happy**



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Are rats right for me?

Rats are very friendly, loyal pets who make close bonds with their owners. They can be easily tamed and make a good first pet for a family. Children should always be supervised during handling.

Rats are very intelligent animals and can learn to do a few tricks like finding their way out of a maze or picking items up or dropping them in a box. The secret is to reward your rat for anything he does to please you.

If properly cared for, rats can live up to 3 years and there are many varieties to choose from including white, cinnamon or blue coloured coats with dark or pink eyes.

Rats need company of their own kind but to avoid unwanted babies (rats breed frequently and have large litters), the best option is usually a pair or group of the same sex.

You will need to dedicate time to your rat as he requires regular exercise and handling for his health and happiness.

Choosing a new pet rat

When selecting your rat, check these signs that he is healthy:

- Healthy appetite
- Active and alert to his surroundings
- Healthy, shiny coat
- Clear nose

- Bright, clear eyes
- Neat teeth in alignment
- Trimmed nails
- Clean bottom

The first few days

It is important that your rat suffers minimal stress when being introduced to their new home. Their cage should already be set up with bedding, water and food, ready for your rat's arrival.

When you bring him home, place him in his cage and leave him to settle for a couple of days. Your new pet needs this time to get used to his surroundings.

If your rat seems comfortable, open the cage door and leave your hand there. Let him come up and sniff you. If he is reluctant, talk to him to try and coax him to you.

At first your rat may be very quick, so it is best to keep hold of them when they are first handled. Pick your rat up around the shoulders and body with one hand and hold him close to you. It is unlikely your rat will sit still to allow you to pick him up, so you will need to be patient when catching him so he doesn't get stressed.

Stroke your rat gently but firmly on their head or neck while talking to them in a quiet voice. Do this several times a day to begin with and within a week to 10 days you should be able to let your rat sit on your shoulder. You will soon have a really lovely pet that will love to be with you.

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Creating a happy home

As rats can grow up to 20cm in length (not including their tail) the cage you choose must be a suitable size. An ideal cage for a pair of rats must be quite large, no less than 90cm³ in size.

A cage with a plastic or metal base with wire bars is a good option. Glass or plastic aquariums are not suitable for rats as they are rarely big enough and don't provide the ventilation your rat needs.

Rats are most comfortable in a draught-free area that is no less than 5°C. Window sills should be avoided as they can become very hot in the afternoon and cold at night.

On the floor of the cage, use a 3cm thick layer of paper-based bedding. Wood shavings are not recommended for use with rats as they have very sensitive respiratory systems and the dust can give them breathing problems. Place a handful of soft bedding in a nesting box or house which will offer some privacy for your rats.

Clean your rat's cage on a regular basis. Spot clean soiled areas daily and clean the entire cage at least once a week with a pet safe disinfectant.



A healthy diet and treats

Rats need a protein-rich diet and fresh water should always be available.

A healthy, varied diet would be:

- Specific rat mix which includes grains and biscuit or a pelleted food (which prevents selective feeding). Hamster feed is not suitable because it contains too many sunflower seeds and peanuts which can cause obesity and illness.
- Dog meal, wholemeal bread and cereals.
- Fresh fruit and vegetables (e.g. banana, apple, strawberry, cabbage, carrot, cucumber, tomato) in small amounts.
- Small pieces of meat, egg and fish.
- Wood gnaws or chews to keep their teeth healthy.

Treat them now and then with some baked potato, a little brown bread, cooked and raw vegetables or cooked pasta (only a little of one thing at any given time).

Getting to know you

Make sure your rat is awake before attempting to handle him. You can pick him up by either cupping him in both hands (useful when handling a very young rat) or by holding his body and shoulders with one hand, while supporting his hind legs with the other. Then bring him to your body so that he feels safe.

A rat should never be picked up by the tail. This will severely injure him as the tail cannot support his weight. You can restrain a young or nervous rat by the base of the tail, as long as his body is being held at the same time.



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Exercise your rat needs

Rats need some toys and things to explore to keep them exercised and alert.

Ropes, ladders and fruit tree branches to climb on and tubes and houses to play in within their cage will all help to provide an interesting environment. Rats also love hammocks to play or sleep in.

Baby rats will enjoy using a wheel, but will be too large for it when they get to adult size.

Rats and other pets

Rats are social animals and must be kept in a pair or group. Ideally, they should be either litter mates, or introduced while still young. It is possible to introduce them in later life as they are such sociable little creatures.

Rat gender

Please ask a member of our team to confirm the sex of your rat before buying.

Potential health issues with rats

Dermatitis

An affected rat scratches its fur until bald spots appear. This may be caused by a poor diet so adding a variety of fruit and vegetables plus a vitamin supplement will help.

These symptoms may also be a sign of mites. Always seek the advice of a vet if these problems persist.

Pneumonia

Red eyes, circles around the eyes, sneezing,

weight loss and wheezing are all symptoms of pneumonia. This is caused by a bacterial infection and can be fatal. Seek urgent veterinary advice straight away.

Ringtail

Signs of this are swelling around the feet and tail which is caused by a lack of humidity in the atmosphere. Try placing a bowl of water near the heater outlet to remedy this problem.

Pet insurance for your rat

Rats can be insured under plans for small mammals, however, it may not be possible to find an insurance plan specifically tailored to rats.

Your new pet checklist

- Large rat cage
- Paper-based bedding
- Nest box or house
- Food bowl
- Water bottle
- Mineral lickstone
- Food
- Wood gnaws
- Cage disinfectant
- Vitamins
- Wheel (if rats are small enough to use one)
- Tubes, ladders etc
- Treats

Help and further advice

If you have any questions about caring for your pet, our fully trained team are happy to help if they can, or advise on where to find more specialist information.

Whilst there is a wealth of information available online, only a professional will be able to correctly answer your query. If in doubt, call your local vet for an appointment.

It is against the law to release, or allow to escape, non-native animals or birds. If you have trouble caring for any animals contact our team for advice.



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