

# Caring for Your Rat

Rats are intelligent and social animals. They are hardy and friendly and make terrific pets for children. They are also quiet, clean and relatively easy to care for. The average life span for a domestic rat is 2–3 years. They are active in the early morning and late afternoon. Rats usually sleep during the day.

## HOUSING

Rats need lots of room to move around. For 1 or 2 rats, your cage should be approximately 20" wide by 14" long by 24" high if it is a multi-level cage. A single level cage should be at least 24" wide by 18" long.

It is absolutely essential for your rat to have the entire wire floor covered with towels, grocery bags, paper, cardboard, or Plexiglas which is gnaw proof and easily washed. Some rats develop a condition called bumble foot (red swollen sores on the bottom of their feet) from walking on wire cage floors. If your rat develops bumble foot, have your rat seen by a vet as soon as possible.

If you use litter or line the tray of the cage, DO NOT USE PINE OR CEDAR SHAVINGS. The oils released from those shavings irritate the respiratory tract.

Use litter approved for small animals only, such as Harvest Grove, Critter Country, or CareFRESH. Most rats, if given the opportunity, will use a litter box! Use a sturdy ceramic crock, or hard plastic (non-chewable) rectangular container and provide fresh litter daily. Do not use clay or clumping cat litter. For best results, find the spot where the rat urinates and defecates and place the litter box in that location.

## DIET

To give your rat a healthy diet, start with a basic Lab Block diet (not a seed mixture) and supplement it daily with fresh foods. Use a sturdy non-tip, non-chewable crock for food.

Use a water bottle that can be suspended from the

side of the cage and change the water daily. Wash the water bottle often.

**Suggested Food:** Whole grain cereals, cooked brown rice, most vegetables & fruits, yogurt, cooked pasta, cooked potato/yams, tofu, organic baby food, edamame.

**Foods to Avoid:** Iceberg lettuce, dried fruit, raw potatoes, sweets, caffeine, carbonated beverages, raw onions, salty or spicy foods, licorice, spinach, dairy products other than yogurt.

## HANDLING

Handle your rat frequently and give him daily playtime outside his cage in a safe area. Always supervise your rat when he is out of his cage. Keep electrical cords, toxic materials, and nice clothing out of reach. All rodents need to chew to stay mentally and physically healthy. Give your rat things to entertain himself with when he's in his cage: wooden blocks to gnaw, paper to shred, ladders to climb, exercise wheels (at least 9" in diameter, solid, not wire wheels with holes), and tunnels to crawl through. PVC pipe available at hardware stores make great tunnels. Make sure they are at least 3" in diam-

eter).

To safely pick up a rat, let him know you are there, approach from the rear, grasp firmly around the abdomen, and lift.

## BEHAVIOR

Consider adopting a second rat to keep your rat company. It is better if the rats are the same sex. If not, neuter the male rat before housing them together. You must introduce rats slowly. Allow them to view each other from separate cages for a week or two and then put them in neutral territory (the bathtub works great). In the neutral spot, leave them together for several hours, the longer the better. If they don't fight you can put them together in



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the same cage. Wash the cage to remove the scent of the resident rat before housing them together (do not use bleach). Remove all toys, hammocks etc. Put in a new hiding box for them to share. This will encourage them to cuddle and sleep together which will help the bonding process. Two males usually get along better if they are neutered.

## CARE

Rats need a place to hide so consider placing a cardboard box in the cage. It is more comfortable for the rats to have some bedding material in the hiding place. You can use hay, shredded paper, soft litter (not cedar or pine) fleece or towels. Rats will shred towels so you will need to throw them out when they get stringy (the fibers often get tangled around the feet and cut off circulation).

Many rats enjoy running in an exercise wheel. If a wheel is introduced when a rat is a baby, most rats will use the wheel for life. For an average size rat, a 9" wheel is large enough. Bigger rats should have an 11" wheel. Wheels that are too small can cause back injuries.

Just like other animals, rats deserve proper veterinary care. Take your rat to the vet if he exhibits any symptoms such as persistent sneezing, itching, limping, wheezing, lumps, bleeding, lethargy, diarrhea, etc. The sooner you take him the better his chances are for successful treatment. Find a veterinarian that has experience treating rats. It is also recommended that you neuter your male rat. There are many benefits to neutering your male rat including reduced odor, softer and less oily fur, decreased aggressiveness, and the ability to house him with females without creating unwanted litters!

## SHOPPING LIST FOR YOUR NEW RAT

- **CAGE**—20" wide by 14" long by 24" high with a solid floor. Wire floors are unsuitable because they can cause soreness and injury.
- **WATER BOTTLE**—8–16oz. Filtered, not bottled, water is best. Tap water contains chlorine, lead and other toxins.
- **FOOD DISH**—Ceramic crocks work best. Plastic bowls tip over and rats will chew on them.
- **TOYS**—Rodent chew sticks, large plastic (chew

proof tubes), small paper bags to hide in and chew up, hammocks, small toys to climb on and crawl thru, small cardboard boxes.

- **BEDDING**—CareFRESH litter is best. Wood shavings are unsuitable because they are toxic and irritating. Fleece is an excellent bedding. Terry cloth is not advised.

Additional information can be found at [BayAreaRats.com](http://BayAreaRats.com) or [RattieRatz.com](http://RattieRatz.com).



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