

# Rat - Facts & Care Sheet

Rats can be traced back thousands of years to Southeast and Central Asia, China and India, where they are thought to have originated. They belong to a group of mouse-like rodents that includes over one thousand species. The black rat arrived in Europe in the 12th century as the shipping trade began to flourish. Its cousin, the brown rat, arrived in the early 18th century. These early rats conjure up images of disease carrying rodents. The domestic varieties have been bred for many years to be intelligent, affectionate, quiet and safe.

Natural scavengers and gnawers rats will chew and eat virtually anything. They love to explore having the ability to find their way through a maze after having explored it only once. With encouragement and hand fed treats, rats can also be trained to perform tricks.

The keeping and breeding of fancy rats became popular in the early 1900's. Fancy rats are descendants of the brown rat, which are thought to have originated from Asia. As a result of captive breeding there are now many different colours and coat types, such as Rex and even Hairless!

Rats are very friendly and rarely bite, they make great pets. They require a large cage but are straight forward to care for. Rats get a bad press but can make great fun pets for children and adults alike, they can be trained to do tricks and after time will learn their own name just like dogs and cats. They live for about 2-3 years. Male rats tend to be bigger but more docile so are probably more suited to younger children than the smaller and quicker female.

Social animals, rats are best kept in pairs or groups. Male rats tend to be more relaxed and calm than females, who usually are very active and enjoy playing.



## How to handle me

When you first get your rats home it is best to leave them alone for the first day or two, to allow them to get used to their new home. Allow your rats to sniff your hand before you handle them as this will help them get used to your smell. Gently stroke your rats in their cage to reassure them, once they allow you to do this they will normally allow you to pick them up. Your rats should be gently scooped up with two hands, never pick them up by their tails. Once your rats become tame they will enjoy coming out to play at regular intervals.

Remember your rats like to chew, so whenever you let them out of their cage they must be supervised at all times.

## Do I make a good pet?

Yes...rats make good family pets. Highly intelligent and are ideal for older children they are generally very clean. Whilst rats are inexpensive to keep, you should buy as large a cage as possible to allow them the optimum amount of space to move around in. Rats are not fully nocturnal like hamsters but often sleep during the day. On average, rats live between 2 and 2 1/2 years. Dumbo rats are a special variety of the normal fancy rat and have larger, differently positioned ears. Fancy rats are available in a variety of colours.

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## Sociable creatures

We strongly recommend that rats are kept in same sex pairs or groups as they're very sociable and human contact alone is not enough. You should buy your rats at the same time as they'll already be friends, although new rats can sometimes be introduced later.

## What sort of home do I need?

A large cage is important because rats need lots of exercise and stimulation and love to explore. There are many types of rodent cages available. However, it's essential that you buy a cage that is designed for rats and NOT for smaller rodents such as hamsters. Ideally, you should buy a large, wire multi-level cage as this will provide lots of interest and allow your rats to use the bars for climbing. Position their home away from radiators or windows to prevent sudden changes in temperature. Cover the base of the cage with a paper-based litter or other suitable litter. Avoid using woodshavings or sawdust as they can irritate rats' eyes and noses and cause allergic reactions. Provide your pets with a private space to sleep in filled with nesting material to keep them cosy. Avoid using straw as it's too sharp and may damage their eyes and mouths.

## What do I eat?

Rats are scavengers in the wild and will eat a wide variety of foods. Pet rats should also be provided with a varied diet containing all the necessary food groups. Nugget diets such as Burgess prevent selective feeding. This is a common problem associated with muesli diets where your pets eat the bits they like and leave the rest, resulting in nutrient deficiencies although some rats manage perfectly well on this diet. You can feed your pets fresh food such as cooked egg, cooked chicken scraps and washed fruit and vegetables such as apples, carrots and sprouts to supplement their basic diet and provide different flavours for them to try. Hanging seed sticks or hiding treats or monkey nuts around their cage provides fun and tasty challenges as well as stimulating natural behaviour! When feeding your pets any of the additional foods mentioned here, you should do so in moderation to avoid stomach upsets and weight gain, restricting treats to one or two a day. A ceramic or metal food bowl is best for your pets – they're gnaw-proof, hard to knock over and easily cleaned and disinfected. Remove left over food and wash their food bowl thoroughly everyday before re-filling it. Rats tend to drink more water than other rodents so a large water bottle is essential. Provide fresh water daily.

## Playtime

Rats need a stimulating environment whilst awake and love to play so should have lots of toys to keep them entertained. Rat, ferret and some large bird toys are great fun as well as tunnels and ropes. Avoid buying hamster toys as they're too small. A large rat ball or wheel is ideal for burning off energy. By simulating their natural environment, you can enrich your pets' lives - keep a pair of rats or a group of them, hide food and treats around their cage and provide lots of different toys to climb on, hide in and chew.

## How to handle me

When you take your rats home they should be left alone for the first day or two to allow them to get used to their new home. Let them sniff your hand so they get to know you and your smell. Gently stroke your pets to reassure them and once they're comfortable with this you can pick them up. A rat should be gently scooped up with both hands. Never pick your rats up by their tails. Once they're used to you they'll enjoy coming out to play. As rats like to chew, they should always be supervised when they're out of their cage.

## Personal hygiene

Clean their home thoroughly at least once a week using hot water and a pet-safe disinfectant. If your pets use one area of their cage as a toilet this will need to be cleaned daily - using a litter tray in this area will make cleaning easier.

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## Health & fitness

Rats should stay healthy With the correct care and attention. They can however be prone to a number of ailments, such as respiratory infections. As with all rodents, rats' teeth grow constantly so it's important to provide them with wooden toys, mineral stones or treats to gnaw on. A healthy rat is active and playful with a full, shiny coat, bright eyes and a clean nose. Signs of illness include red staining around the eyes and nose, bald patches or skin irritation, lethargy and loss of appetite. If your pet shows signs of being unwell contact your vet immediately.

## Top tips for a healthy pet

### Dental

Gnawing toys are an essential part of your pets' dental routine and should always be available as they help to prevent overgrown teeth.

### Vitamins and supplements

Vitamins can be added to your pets' food or water. Probiotic supplements can help to maintain healthy digestion and relieve stress. Getting used to their new surroundings can be stressful for your rats so consider buying probiotic supplements before you take them home.

### Fleas, mites and flies

Keep an eye on your pets' skin and coat for signs of fleas and mites such as bald patches or irritation.

### Cleaning and hygiene

Clean out your pets' home at least once a week using hot water and a pet-safe disinfectant

