

Rat Care

Background

Also known as: Domestic rat (a descendant of the wild brown rat)

Weight: Males, 1 to 1 1/2 pounds; females, 1/2 to 1 pound

Length: 14-18 inches, including tail

Lifespan: 2-3 years

Cost per year: \$300

Good with kids?: Great for families with children 5 & up, but young caretakers should be supervised by an adult.

Fun fact: When rats are very content, they grind their teeth!

Food

- High-quality rodent chow (called rat blocks) should be available to your pet at all times. You can find this at pet supply stores and feed stores—look for a brand with soymeal as the main ingredient.
- Fresh, clean water should also be available to your rats 24/7. A waterbottle with a drinking tube that attaches to the cage is the best way to go.
- Offer small, bite-sized bits of fresh fruits and veggies daily.
 - >> Recommended: peas, broccoli, carrots, apples, bananas
 - >> Avoid: chocolate, corn, candy, caffeinated beverages, cheese, sticky foods such as peanut butter
- Rats LOVE people food, and you can give yours the occasional table scrap, such as cooked pasta or a bit of pizza crust. Limit treats or you'll have a fat rat!

Cage & Environment

- Rats are very social, and should be kept in pairs at a minimum. A pair of females is recommended for first-time caretakers. Males can do well together if introduced when young. Females are more accepting of new friends later in life.
- A neutered male can live with females, or a spayed female can live with males. Don't keep intact males and females together, as they will breed. The average litter ranges from 12-20 babies!

- Solid-bottom, powder-coated wire cages are recommended for rats. 2' X 2' X 2' is the minimum size for a pair of rats, but do get the largest cage you can afford. You can also use a large, multi-level ferret cage or an aquarium with a screen cover for adequate ventilation.
- Rats are prone to colds and heatstroke, so keep the cage indoors, away from drafts, direct sunlight and extreme temperatures, in an environment maintained at 60 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit. A room where the family gathers in the early evening is ideal—your gregarious pets will love it!
- Line the cage with bedding (see Supply Checklist for recommendations). Do not use cedar or pine chips, which contain oils that are dangerous to rats. Provide shredded paper towels or napkins if your rats like to make nests.
- Your pets will need a cave for sleeping and resting, such as a small flower pot or box.

Behavior & Handling

- Rats are friendly and curious by nature, but you'll need to get your pets used to you—and used to being handled. Start by feeding them small treats. When they're comfortable with that, pick them up one at a time, one hand supporting the bottom, the other over the back. When you get to know each other better, don't be surprised if your pets want to snuggle or sit on your lap or shoulder!
- Once your rats are hand-tamed, let them play outside the cage in a safe, secure area for an hour every day. Out-of-cage playtime is mandatory—and will keep your smart, active friends mentally stimulated and physically fit. Supervise at all times, as rats will chew on anything in their paths—including electrical wires.

Exercise & Toys

- A bored rat is an unhappy rat! Provide PVC tubes for your pets to run through, and ladders and tree branches for climbing. Parrot toys, including swings and ropes, are great for rats.
- Some rats love exercise wheels. Get one with a solid surface without wire rungs, so your pets' tails cannot get caught while running.
- Give your pets appropriate chew toys to help wear down their teeth, which grow continuously.
 - >> Recommended: unpainted, untreated wood, dog biscuits, safe cardboard and rawhide chews

Daily Care

- Remove soiled bedding, droppings and stale/uneaten food daily. Clean and refill the water bottle every day.
- Clean cage completely once a week by replacing dirty bedding and scrubbing down the rest of the cage with warm, soapy water.

Signs of Illness

- Bring your rats to the veterinarian annually for check-ups. Don't wait for your yearly appointment if you think one of your rats is sick—seek help immediately. Common signs that something isn't right include sneezing, lethargy, weight loss, dull eyes, open wounds, diarrhea and difficulty breathing.
- Rats are susceptible to external parasites such as lice. If you think your pets are infested, consult a veterinarian.

Rat Supply Checklist

- Wire cage, large aquarium with screen cover or multi-level ferret cage
- Aspen or pelleted recycled paper bedding
- Small boxes or flower pots
- Tree branch for climbing
- Exercise wheel (solid, no rungs)
- PVC tubes for tunneling
- Rodent chow (also called rat blocks)
- Attachable water bottle with drinking tube
- Unpainted, untreated piece of wood, dog biscuits or safe chew toy
- Toys, including swings, ropes and other toys made for parrots