

Pet Rat Care



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Wee Companions Philosophy

Our mission is to rescue guinea pigs, rats, hamsters, and other small exotic mammals from shelters, places of abandonment, and from persons relinquishing their pets. Whenever possible, we offer a safe house to these animals, irrespective of age, temperament, or health status. These animals will receive veterinary care and socialization in the hopes that they will be placed in a "forever" home. Animals given Sanctuary Status will be placed in our Foster Care Network to live out their lives in comfort and with love. We are also focused on educating foster parents, school children and others on the care, feeding and prevention of unwanted litters of these animals.

Are You the Right Home for a Rat?

Rats are extremely intelligent, friendly and social animals that make great pets, but they're not for everyone. Before adopting a rat, examine your lifestyle. Are you able to interact with your rat every day? While they're cage animals, rats need stimulation, and require at least an hour outside of their cage every day. You'll also need to clean their cage at least weekly. Rats are great pets and can be a great addition to most homes. Although, some situations may lead to an unhappy rat or an unhappy owner, it is best to analyze if a rat is right for you before getting the pet.

1. Do you have enough time to spend with your pet? Rats are very regressive animals and will tend to become more antisocial and possibly even aggressive if left without attention for long periods of time. Because rats cannot free range in most homes like cats and dogs, rats are often left in their cage without interaction for long periods of time if an owner is too busy. Before adopting a rat, make sure that you can spend at least 1 hour a day on average. More time is always better!
2. Do you have enough money to spend on veterinary care? Unfortunately, rats are not cheap animals. If rats are not spayed and neutered at relatively young ages, they usually develop many health issues. Before adopting, make a budget. Make sure that you have enough money for spay/neuter, for general well visits with your vet, and possible surgery late in life.
3. Do you have an indoor space available for your rat? Rats that live outdoors are usually subjected to extreme heat, extreme cold, and extreme weather changes. This can be fatal for rats. Also, most cages are no match to hungry predators. For a rat to live a long, healthy life, it needs to live in an indoor, temperature regulated environment.
4. Are there other animals in the household? If yes, will they be aggressive with a pet rat? If so, many precautions would need to be taken to protect your rat and also to offer a regular play time without fear of injury. Many households can exist with dogs, cats and rats as long as precautions are made to keep animals separate. The only exception to this is ferrets. The smell of a ferret usually really scares rats. Ferrets and rats need to be kept in different spaces/rooms.

Rats are great pets for apartments and large homes. They travel well and thrive on attention. Rats are very adaptable animals and will easily learn to live in most households. As long as rats are given space, care, and safety, most rats can adapt to almost any environment.

Before you Adopt a Rat ...

1. Which adults in the family will be the primary caretakers?
2. Does everyone in your family want a rat?
3. Rats are considered exotic animals and their veterinary care is expensive, bills can easily reach hundreds of dollars. Are you prepared to provide this level of care, should it be necessary for your rats?
4. Is anyone in your home allergic to rats?
5. Do you have an appropriate cage and supplies?
6. Do you have animals that could endanger the rats?
7. Will you be able to supervise any children around these rats?
8. Have you had rats before? Where are they now?
9. Are you allowed to have rats in your house / apartment?
10. If you move, get married, have a baby or if the kids lose interest, are you prepared to keep your rats?

How Many?

Always get at least two same sex rats. Rats are social animals and require the companionship of other rats. Even if you are able to have your rat out of the cage several hours a day, there will still be time when it's alone and in need of company, and will want another rat to groom, play and snuggle with. Remember, in the wild rats live in groups. It's their nature, and domestic rats aren't any different.

Two rats (and three and four!) aren't any more difficult to take care of than one, and it's so entertaining to watch them play and interact. Having more than one rat also won't mean they'll bond with you any less. Since they're happy, they will most likely bond with you even more.

Boys or Girls?

Both boys and girls make great pets and have wonderful qualities, although there are a few differences.

Males are generally bigger than females, and more laid back. They can make great laprats and can be very snuggly and always wanting scratches. Males can be more territorial, so try and get rats younger than 4 months if you're introducing them to other rats. Males (especially intact males) do mark their territory more, and also tend to have rougher fur which can have buck grease. Aesthetically a lot of people seem to be put off by their rather large testicles, but you honestly do get used to them. Intact males also tend to smell a little more than girls, although it's not a bad smell. Many say their boys smell like corn chips. Neutered males have softer fur, no buck grease, less smell and don't mark as much.

Females are smaller and sleeker, and are usually much more active, rarely sitting still. They're great fun to watch and play with. They're much less likely to be content to just sit on your lap. As they grow old, they do slow down, and usually loves scratches and snuggles. They smell different too! Some smell like grape soda, some even smell like flowers. Females are unfortunately also more prone to tumors. Spayed females have much lower incidence of mammary and pituitary tumors.

Of course, these are all generalizations. Every rat is different. I've known female rats that have been laprats right from the start, and boys that are always on the go.

Choosing a rat

Once you've decided that rats fit in with your lifestyle, you need to decide where to get them, and you need to know what to look for.

There are basically three types of places to get rats; Rescues, breeders and pet stores. Rescues include private rescue groups such as Wee Companions, local humane societies and animal control. Responsible rat breeders are few and far between. It is possible to locate breeders via the internet. The most common source of rats is pet stores. However, pet stores are supplied by mills that produce thousands of animals each year and therefore they are not handled and you run the risk of getting pregnant females or sick animals. Another common place to get rats is from breeders. We would like to encourage adoption of rats from rescues. It is very rewarding giving a rat in need a loving home.

There are a few things to look for when deciding on what rats to get. First, make sure the rats are housed in single sex groups. Rats can mate from 5 weeks of age, and you don't want to take one home, only to end up with 16 more babies within 3 weeks. You also want to make sure the rats aren't housed in crowded conditions. If they are, please go elsewhere. You don't want to support a pet store that doesn't treat their rats well.

It's always a good idea to do a health check. Check to see if their fur has a healthy shine, and the rat doesn't have any lumps or scabs. Make sure there isn't any red discharge from the eyes and nose. The red discharge is called porphyrin which can indicate that rat is stressed or ill. Hold the rat up to your ear and

listen to its breathing. If you hear wheezing or grunting, the rat could have a respiratory infection or be suffering from allergies.

Checking for temperament is also important. If you get a rat from a breeder, ask if they've been handled and socialized since birth. Try and avoid a rat that appears afraid and skittish, and squeaks when you pick it up. Also avoid rats that show any signs of aggression. Some rats are playful and outgoing and will run up to you and sniff you, others are shy. Choose the rat that has the qualities you're looking for. Usually the best pet rat is the one that comes up and chooses you. Of course, there may be one that's afraid and cowering in the corner that you just can't resist. Just keep in mind it will probably require more time and patience to socialize.

When you get your new rats home, put them in their cage and let them explore their new home for a few hours. Most rats will be a little nervous and intimidated by their new surroundings. Let the rats get used to their new home in their own time, and handle them gently. When you do pick up a rat, never ever grab them by their tail. This can be painful for them, and makes them feel unsafe. There is also a risk of degloving, where the skin breaks loose from the tail. Degloving is extremely painful as it exposes the vertebrae of the tail, the skin will not regrow and amputation of the exposed portion of the tail will be required. You should always pick them up by their middle, supporting their feet with your other hand. Offering it treats, as well as carrying the rat around cuddled up in your shirt is also a good way to create a bond with your new rat.

Cages

Finding the perfect cage is important for that rat and the human owner. Cages can be difficult to clean and keep sanitary, so try to see a cage assembled before buying and make sure to read reviews of cages if you cannot see one for yourself.

Important things to look for in a cage...

- Make sure that the bar spacing is 1" x ½" for younger rats or female. Large males can usually live in cages with 1" x 1" or 1" x 2" bar spacing. Just keep in mind that if a rat can fit its head through the bars, then it can escape the cage.
- Buy cages with coating on the bars. Exposed galvanized bars and pans will absorb the ammonia smell of the urine and will be difficult to clean as the cage ages.
- Large doors. The larger the door, the easier to interact with your rat and move large items in and out of the cage, such as wheels for running and houses. When closing large doors, be cautious not to squish a rat's head or paws.
- Look for durability. Plastic trays and shelves can easily get chewed, look for wire or metal cages and pans. Also, the more durable the metal, the longer the cage life and less money will be spent in the long run. Look for heavy duty metal bars, not thin bars that sag.
- Always avoid using aquariums as cages, if possible. Aquarium cages have less air flow than metal bar cages and can cause a build up of ammonia from urine or dust from bedding.
- Easily removable pans are always a must. Cages that have tops that are difficult to remove or wire bottoms are not easy to clean. Try to find cages that have large pans that will be easy to clean.
- Rats love to nest and rearrange all their cage furniture and bedding. Look for cages with deep pans to contain as much of the cage remnants as possible.

Always remember, the larger the better! A rat can never truly have too much room or too many toys. Make a space in your home to accommodate the rats and make a realistic estimate about what size of cage you can fit and then go cage shopping. Keep in mind that the minimum cage space for a rat is two cubic square feet for one rat. A good rule of thumb is to get the biggest cage that you can afford. Think of the

cage as an investment, it's better and more economical to spend a little more in the beginning for the perfect cage than to settle for a cheaper cage and upgrade later.

Examples of cages that many rat owners love are the Martin's Cages (www.martinscages.com), Ferret Nation and Critter Nation by Midwest Cages, some SuperPet Cages, and some All Living Thing Cages. Martins Cages and the Critter Nation are good for all ages of rats. If choosing a Martins Cage, the R670 is the smallest you would want to go for 2 female rats. The R690 is fine for 4 rats, the R680 and R685 are fine for 4 rats, the R695 is fine for 6 rats and the R699 or RUUD can house 10 rats. The Ferret Nation is not appropriate for babies and small females, but fine for larger females and males. The single level Ferret and Critter Nations are good for 6 rats, the double level is good for 12 rats and the triple level Ferret Nation can house 18 rats. Ferret and Critter Nations can be divided so that each level is its own independent cage.

Things to think about before deciding where to put a cage in your home...

- Always beware of the items surrounding your cage. Rats will pull anything within reach into their cage through the bars.
- Make sure the area is not too cold, too hot, or too drafty. Also, avoid putting a cage in direct sunlight or by a sunny window. By avoiding these conditions, you will have a healthier rat.
- If you have other pets in the household that might stalk the rats, try to get a cage with ½" bar spacing. This will allow a larger distance between animals and will not allow for paws or noses to get into the rat cage. Although, our rats rarely bite us, they have very little issues in biting what they believe to be a predator.

Wheels

Many rats like to run on wheels. If providing a wheel to your rats, it is important to get a wheel that is at least 11" or 12" in diameter.

Bedding

Pine and Cedar wood chip beddings are bad for rats, and can damage the respiratory tract, causing chronic respiratory disease. Studies on humans have had these results so it is safe to say that the same applies to our ratty friends.

Shredded aspen is a safe wood chip bedding for your rat and can be found at most pet stores. If they don't have it, they should be able to order it in for you.

Recycled paper litters are also good choices. Brands such as Back2Nature, CareFresh, CareFresh Ultra, Yesterday's News, CelSorb are all good options. EcoBedding, crinkled paper bedding, is also a good option. Cages should be completely cleaned every week and bedding replaced. During the week spot cleaning will help keep your cage smelling sweet. If your rats are toilet trained you may want to only use it in litter trays. Normal clay or clumping cat litters can be harmful to rats if ingested so it is best not to use them at all.

A good cheap bedding option is towels or polar fleece. These can be cut to the shape and size of each level and fastened in place with hooks or sticky velcro dots. It is best to have two or three full sets of towels for your cage so you can cycle through them and have a spare clean set should you need to change a towel unexpectedly (water bottle leaking is a prime example of this). If you have a wire cage you can even fasten towels to the levels with twist-ties through the corners.

Some people feel that towels or polar fleece are a smellier bedding option, but that can be avoided by spot cleaning the cage regularly and changing the fabric out at least twice a week. Towels can be soaked overnight in a diaper sanitizer or diaper wash and then rinsed out in the washing machine.

Rat Diet

It's important that your rat is fed a balanced and nutritious diet. You'll find rats will eat most things you give them, but just like us humans, that doesn't mean they should. They have fairly specific nutritional requirements in order to stay healthy and in peak condition.

Rats are omnivores, and generally need their diet to be about 75- 80% carbohydrates, 12 - 20 % protein (too much protein can cause your rat to itch, causing scabs), and around 4 - 6% of fat. Well rounded diets can be difficult to find. Most pet stores carry foods that are too high in protein and fat. Examples of well-rounded diets are Harlan Teklad rat blocks and Oxbow Regal Rat. These foods can be difficult to find, especially in rural areas. At Wee Companions we feed Harlan Teklad supplemented with fresh fruit and vegetables. Harlan Teklad is not available at pet stores; however it is available for purchase from Wee Companions. Another alternative is to make your own rat mix.

Nuts that are still in the shell are great treats for rats. This allows for rats to wear down their teeth by chewing through the shell, it will offer entertainment, and will also offer a treat at the end. It may entice a rat to eat a shelled nut if they are slightly cracked the first few times that they are given. Another great treat that can wear down the teeth are bones. Chicken bones are a favorite. Instead of throwing away bones after a meal, give your rats the left over bones.

Make sure you supplement your rat's diet with fresh fruit and vegetables on a daily basis. Especially popular among rats are peas, carrot, fresh corn, avocado, (high in fat, so only in moderation), cucumber, broccoli, cauliflower, cooked sweet potatoes, grapes, blueberries, banana. A little bit of cooked chicken, chicken bones (rats gnaw rather than chew so bones are perfectly safe), pasta, rice, couscous, and any healthy leftovers can also be fed to your rats for extra variety - rats LOVE variety. Olive or flaxseed oil on wheat bread a couple of times a week also keeps the rat's fur in good condition, and they enjoy it. The oil is especially helpful in reducing the amount of buck grease intact males produce.

Water

Water should be offered in a water bottle, for hygiene reasons. Make sure the water bottle is within easy access for the rats, especially for older rats that aren't as mobile as they used to be. Having two water bottles available for the rats is also a good idea - if one bottle runs out or gets stuck there is another source of water available until the problem is fixed. Bottles should be cleaned on a weekly basis.

Treats

It's ok to give your rats treats now and again. It's a great way to train a rat and reinforce a behavior, and to get your rat to trust you. They also love them, and there's nothing quite like looking at the face of a happy rat. Treats suitable for rats include:

- Yoghurt drops, choc chips (chocolate isn't poisonous to rats) and yoghurt covered raisins.
- Frozen peas and corn
- popcorn, sunflower seeds & pumpkin seeds

Harmful foods

Just like you and me, rats can eat most things; however there are a few exceptions.

Foods to avoid:

- Blue Cheese - the mold in it is toxic to rats
- Green Bananas - inhibits starch-digesting enzymes
- Green Potato Skin and Eyes - contain solanine, a toxin
- Licorice - suspected to cause neurological poisoning in a rat
- Orange Juice - forbidden for male rats only, the d-limonene in the skin oil can cause cancer.
- Mango - also forbidden for male rats only, due to the d-limonene in the flesh.
- Raw Artichokes - inhibits protein digestion
- Raw Bulk Tofu or Meat- can contain bacteria, packaged raw tofu is safe
- Raw Dry Beans or Peanuts - contains antinutrients that destroy vitamin A and enzymes needed to digest protein and starches and causes red blood cells to clump
- Raw Red Cabbage and Brussel Sprouts - contains antinutrient that destroys thiamin (cooked is fine)
- Raw Sweet Potato - contains compounds that form cyanide in the stomach (cooked is fine and a hit with most rats)
- Avocado skin and pit - toxic to rats. The flesh is fine
- Rhubarb - contains high levels of oxalates
- Sticky foods such as Peanut Butter, some Candy, and Dried Fruits - poses a choking hazard. Peanut butter can be "cut" with jam or honey to make it more liquid, and reduce the possibility of choking.
- Seaweed - the seaweed that comes on sushi or in soup poses a choking hazard.
- Wild Insects - can carry internal parasites and diseases

Foods to feed with caution:

- Carbonated beverages. Rats can't burp, so drinking them can cause discomfort.
- Dried corn. Contains fungus known to cause cancer in rats, so limit the amount you give them. Some fresh corn is ok in moderation.

Rats are also extremely inquisitive, and will try and taste most things, including things that aren't food. Be careful with what you leave lying around. They have been known to get into felt tip pens, moisturizers, and soap. Basically, if it smells interesting, they'll try it!

Things to Know...

Do not pick up or hold a rat by its tail. Sometimes, the skin around a rat's tail can slip off and leave exposed bone and muscle if picked up by its tail. This is called degloving. If a tail becomes degloved, it will require veterinary attention.

Red discharge from a rat's eyes or nose is called porphyrin. A simple way to tell the difference between porphyrin and blood is that it stays a red color and does not fade to brown. Secretion of porphyrin likely means your rat is sick and needs to see the vet.

It is believed that pine and cedar bedding cause respiratory problems with rats. To keep a rat healthy, try aspen bedding or recycled paper beddings such as Carefresh or Back 2 Nature.

Rats are very territorial. Make sure that rat introductions are slow and progressive. Never just throw a rat into another rat's cage, they will likely fight.

Rats can be aggressive with other animals. Make sure to keep cages away from cats and dogs, not only for the rats' sake, but also for the other pet's sake.

Rats should have as much room as possible to run, explore, and enjoy themselves. Never use hamster or mouse cages for rats, they are too small.

Other species integration

Rats are generally not a type of animal that can be introduced to other species. Most rats surprise people with how aggressive they can be with other animals.

Most people think of rats and think prey animal. Rats are killed and eaten by a lot of different types of animals. Cats and dogs can be a danger to rats. The outcome of this type of an inter-species relationship will likely depend on the personality of the dog or cat. Always keep in mind that cats and dogs are predators of rats and will likely kill a rat if given the opportunity. This applies to all predator animals, including ferrets.

What most people do not think about is that rats are also predators. Rats are very aggressive with other animals such as birds, mice, and insects. Multi-species homes should avoid interaction between rats and other smaller prey animals. Rats have also been known to attack larger animals, such as guinea pigs, rabbits, and cats.

Attacks can happen quickly and are sometimes fatal. The best method of keeping both your rat and other pet safe is to keep them separate. Although, some people have successfully introduced their rats to other pets, other people have also suffered the loss of a pet due to inter-species introductions. The best way to keep your pets safe and unharmed is to keep them separate.

Checklist of Supplies for Rats

- Cage (The larger the better. Keep in mind that small rat can squeeze between bar spaces of more than ½")
- Water bottle
- Food bowl (Heavy ceramic bowls are best to avoid tipping)
- Rat food (A well rounded, high quality diet.)
- Bedding (Avoid cedar or pine bedding. Use beddings such as Back2Nature or CareFresh)
- Hammock (Rats love to sleep in hammocks)
- House (Wood or cardboard is preferable because rats can chew and wear down their teeth as well as sleep in their house)
- Toys (Anything to keep them entertained. Bird toys are a great option)
- Chews (Wood, cardboard, paper, shelled nuts)

Resources Wee

Companions

www.weecompanions.com

Ratclub.org – The Kiwi Rat Resource. www.ratclub.org

Forbidden Food

www.ratfanclub.org/diet.html

Cages

www.martinscages.com

Cage Calculator

www.ratclub.org

RatGuide – A Layman's Guide to Health, Medication Use, Breeding, and Responsible Care of Pet Rats

www.ratguide.com