



Rats

You want your new pet to be happy – and so do we. So we've put together this guide to caring for rats, which is handy if you already have rats or are thinking about getting them. Rats can make good family pets but may be better suited to adults or older children, as they're more active after dark when younger children may have gone to bed. As rats enjoy company, you should keep them in same sex pairs or groups. Likely to live 2 to 2½ years though some may live longer

Lots to do

Rats are active and love to play and explore. Add lots of tunnels, ropes, toys, hammocks, and ladders to keep them busy. They also love to dig tunnels and burrows. These energetic, intelligent pets need plenty of suitable activities to keep them stimulated, fit, and healthy, as they can quickly become bored.

Best buddies

Rats enjoy company, so we recommend you choose a same sex pair or group. Ideally, buy them together so you know they're already friends, however new rats can sometimes be carefully introduced later. Provide lots of space and hiding places so they can get away from each other if they want to. Check them daily to make sure they are getting on; if they start to fall out, you will need to house them separately to prevent any injuries.

Dream bedtimes

Rats like nothing more than making their own nest, including shelters where rats can build a comfy nest and snuggle down together in the dark. Pop in some paper tissues or dust-free soft hay that they can chew and shred. Do not use cotton wool for bedding or synthetic fibres, which may get caught around limbs or cause blockages if eaten. Ideally, shelters should have two entrances so they can't be trapped inside or prevented from entering by another rat.

Just the place

Position your cage out of direct sunlight and draughts, and away from radiators and electrical equipment. Try to keep it in a place where the lights go off around the same time each night. Rats may be up at night and exercise a lot, so a bedroom may not be the best place for them, but it should be somewhere quiet where they can rest undisturbed away from other pets.

A happy home

Rats need lots of room, so a large cage, designed especially for rats is a must. With lots of levels to give extra floor space to scamper and scurry about on, a hamster cage simply isn't big enough and won't do. It should have a solid floor as wire mesh floors can lead to foot problems, but the sides can be wire, as rats love to climb.

Be cage-proud

Clean your rat's cage at least weekly, with hot water and a disinfectant that's safe for pets. Change their bedding, but keep a little bit of the previous (dry, unsoiled) nesting back. Rats can find cleaning their cage stressful as it removes familiar scents. Putting some of their dry, unsoiled nestings back can help them to relax. Toilet areas will need cleaning daily, so you might want to try a litter tray to make things easier. Cleaning is a job best done in the evening when your rats are naturally awake.

Easy eating

Ceramic bowls are best for rats. They can't chew them, you can clean them easily, and they're hard to knock over. Rats also like to forage for their food so you should scatter food around their cage for them to find. nutrient-rich nuggets to make sure rats get everything they need, we feed them Pets at Home rat nuggets. These include all the vitamins and minerals they need in their diet, which means they can't skip bits as they might with muesli mixes.

Happy tummies

As our rats are fed on Pets at Home food, we recommend you do the same to prevent upset tummies from a change of diet. If you do want to change their food, do it slowly. Introduce new foods over 10 days or so and phase out their old food completely.

Unfussy eaters

Rats love food and will happily munch on meat, plants and seeds. As well as rat nuggets, occasionally try small amounts of grain, cooked egg, cooked chicken, apples, broccoli, peanuts in their shells, and even dandelion leaves for a tasty change.

Ration treats

Rats love treats. But whether it's cooked egg or seeds, cooked chicken, apples or nuts, these should be given as part of their daily ration, not in addition to it. Also, avoid feeding foods that

are high in fat or sugar. Although rats do like these types of foods, if they eat too much of them, it can lead to obesity and other health problems.

Settling in

Although it's hard, hold back your excitement and give your rats plenty of time to get to know both you and their new home. Moving house can be stressful for rats. Let them settle in for a few days before handling them. They may sneeze as they get used to their new home, but this should stop after a few days. If not, see your vet.

Meet and greet

Bonding with a rat takes time, and it'll be a while before you can pick yours up. Start by talking gently to your pets so they get to know your voice. Then place a hand in a far corner of their cage so they get used to your smell. Then start stroking them, perhaps offering a treat too. When your rat seems ready, gently scoop them up with both hands so they feel secure and supported.

Feeling jumpy

Remember that rats can jump around two feet or even more. So, if you take them out of the cage, hold them close to the floor or a surface, so they won't be able to easily get away from you. Always supervise children with rats.

Looking good

A healthy rat is active and playful and has a shiny coat, bright eyes and a clean nose. Check your pet's skin and coat for signs of fleas and mites, such as bald patches or irritation.

All eyes

Keep an eye on rats when they're out of the cage. They naturally like to chew, so they may find all kinds of unhealthy and unsuitable objects to gnaw upon.

Daily workouts

As well as ladders and platforms, add ropes and a rat wheel to the cage, so your rats can burn off even more energy. Why not try clicker training too? Rats are quick learners and are eager to work for a favourite treat! Some owners have a separate playpen outside the cage for their rats to exercise in. Move them there in the evening when they're most active

A healthy rat

A good diet and clean cage, as well as regular veterinary check-ups, will help your rats stay healthy, but there are a few things to keep an eye out for.

Dental care

Like all rodents, rats' teeth keep on growing. So keep wooden gnawing toys, blocks and mineral stones in the cage at all times to help prevent problems. Check their teeth regularly, and if anything's wrong, see your vet.

Health worries

Rats aren't as tough as you may think and need lots of care. Watch out for sneezing, a dull spiky coat, bald patches, dry or irritated skin and lethargy. Changes in eating/drinking or behaviour can also be a sign that rats are poorly. You may also see red flecks around the nose and eyes. This isn't blood but porphyrin, a sign they're stressed. If you spot any of these symptoms, see your vet.

On the move

Travelling is stressful for rats, but if you have to go to the vet, take them in their cage or plastic carrier box. To calm them, move rat pairs/groups together and pop some familiar bedding in there too.

Quiet time

To avoid causing them unnecessary stress, try to avoid waking up a sleeping rat. This could frighten them and they may bite. They may also find it harder to trust someone who always disturbs them when they are asleep. It is best to handle your rats in the evening when they are naturally awake.

Health boosters

Some rat owners use probiotic supplements to relieve stress and aid healthy digestion. You may wish to use them when you first take your rat home, as this can be particularly stressful. Always keep a close eye on your rats without disturbing them to ensure they're behaving normally and have everything they need.

Health and hygiene

All pets can carry diseases, some of which can pass to people. Always clean your hands with soap and water after handling or feeding your pets, or cleaning their home and equipment, and ensure children do the same. Always supervise children to ensure they do not put pets (or objects that pets have been in contact with) near their mouths. It is best to avoid kissing your pet. Children under 5, pregnant women, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems should pay extra attention to hygiene when feeding, handling or cleaning out pets, their housing and accessories. Do not clean pet equipment with your normal washing-up.

If you are ever bitten by a small animal, the bite wound should be promptly cleaned and disinfected before being covered by a waterproof dressing. Seek medical advice if you feel unwell following the bite. Full detailed guidance is available at the Public Health England

website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pet-rats-mice-hamsters-reducing-the-risk-of-infection>

Adopting rats

Caring for rats is a big responsibility. If you think you're ready, have researched their welfare needs and you are committed to caring for them for their whole lives, why not consider giving a home to one of the rescue rats at our 'Pets Foundation' centres, RSPCA animal centres across England and Wales and other animal charities.

Are rats the right pet for you?

We know getting a new pet can be an exciting time, but before you commit, why not take some time to talk through these questions with your family?

Who are the rats for?

Do think carefully about who'll look after your rats. They're mainly active at night and will be waking up when young children go to bed. So they may not be the most suitable pets for families with young children. If older children look after them, remember an adult will be responsible for ensuring they are cared for properly every day.

Do I have enough space?

You'll need room for a large cage, indoors and away from other pets. You should be aware that rats could disturb light sleepers with their night-time activity and need to be housed somewhere quiet where they can rest undisturbed.

Can I afford rats?

Rats aren't cheap pets. The cost of food, bedding, toys, holiday care and vet's fees soon add up. Remember, rats are a social species, so you should have at least two or more, and if they fall out, they'll need separate cages, toys and bedding.

Do I have the time?

Feeding, cleaning, health checking and bonding with your rats are vital to your pets' wellbeing, and need to be done every day, usually in the evening when your pets are naturally awake.

Can I commit to looking after rats?

The average rat lives for 2-2½ years, but it could be longer. In that time, older children may leave home. Also, think about how often you may go away on holiday.

Who'll care for your rats every day?

Rats can be wonderful pets, but they need wonderful owners too.

The five welfare needs

A good home - Your rat needs a suitable place to live

A healthy diet - The right food for a healthy, balanced diet and fresh water on tap

Ways to stay happy - The chance to do the things rats like to do, like climb, run, forage and explore

The right company - Being with, or away from, other animals

Help to be healthy - Protection against pain, injury, suffering and diseases

Your happy rat checklist

- Large rat cage
- Rat house for each rat in the cage for sleeping
- Tubes, tunnels and boxes
- Suitable bedding, e.g. paper-based
- Safe nesting material, e.g. soft shredded paper
- Hammocks
- Ceramic food bowl
- Large water bottle
- Pets at Home rat nuggets
- Healthy rat treats
- Rat-sized toys
- Bottle brush
- Gnawing toys
- Pet-safe disinfectant
- Rodent playpen
- Tray for digging and safe, suitable digging material (for use outside the cage)

- Time every day for your new friend
- A book on rats
- Local vet to register your rats with

Pets at Home

Visit your nearest pet care centre to pick up essentials for your rat, or you can shop online at www.petsathome.com.

The Pets Foundation

Changes do happen, and if you can no longer care for a pet you've bought from us, please get in touch so we can try to rehome them. Never abandon your pet or let them loose in the wild.