

# RATS

~by Dr. Kay Bishop; APS of Durham Veterinarian



**Origin:** are intelligent, affectionate, clean animals with lots of personality and enjoy spending time with people. They are curious and adventurous.

**Behavior:** Rats live in colonies in the wild and therefore should be kept in at least (same sex unless neutered or spayed) pairs as pets. They groom each other, play and sleep (often piled up) together. Since you are part of the rat pack too, don't be surprised if your rats start grooming you too! They might check your ears, nose, eye brows, lips and teeth. Be proud and enjoy!

**Lifespan:** 2.5 years

**Urine Marking:** Rats urine mark. Usually young rats and males urine mark more than older, spayed/neutered rats and females. Urine tells another rat one's species, sex, age, social status and reproductive status. Rats may also mark because it helps them know where they are and where they've been. Rats are also capable of following the odor trails they have left through the environment.

## Housing

**Cage:** Since rats are smart, curious, adventurous and love to explore they need a lot of room. Get the largest cage you can afford (aquariums or hamster cages are not suitable!). The best cages out there are "Martins cages" ([www.martinscages.com](http://www.martinscages.com)) or "Ferret or Critter Nation" by Midwest Cages. The Ferret Nation is suitable for larger adult rats only since babies and very small rats could squeeze through the cage bars. Do a thorough cleaning weekly with a mild soap. If you use bleach, make sure that the cage has been properly rinsed. A quick spot cleaning will be necessary more often (cleaning litter pan, changing blankets, taking out uneaten veggies and fruit etc.).

**Bedding:** As for bedding "Carefresh", "Aspen", "Cel-sorb plus", "Yesterday's News" or "Sunseed fresh world" are good options. You can also use fleece blankets or towels for the bottom pan. You will see what works best for you and the rats (in terms of odor control and/or dustiness). Never use pine or cedar bedding since it is toxic for all small animals! Newspaper is not a good idea because of the ink and lack of odor control. It is recommended to cover up the shelves with fabric shelf liners (fleece, cotton etc.) so the little rat feet won't have to walk on the bare wire. It's best to have at least 2 sets so you can wash them more often. Wood is a bad idea since the rats will most likely pee on it and will soon stink to high heaven.

**Toys and Accessories:** Rats need a comfy place where they can sleep or hang out. Spoil your fur-kids with hammocks, plastic or wooden hide-outs. They come in all different sizes and shapes. It can also be as simple as an empty Kleenex box. Rats are intelligent creatures and like to chew (some more, some less). Make sure to provide them with lots of stimulating toys: Apple sticks, empty toilet paper rolls, cardboard boxes, Kleenex boxes, bird/cat toys, ladders, a running wheel (make sure it has a solid surface), PVC pipes, ferret pipes etc.

## Diet

**Blocks:** A rat's main diet should be good quality "lab blocks" and should be preferred over seed mix. They provide your rat with a balanced nutrition. The problem with seed mixes is that your rat will most likely pick out its favorite bits and leave the rest, which can lead to a dietary imbalance if there are components your rat consistently avoids. Also, seed mixes are usually high in fat. The best brands of lab blocks are Oxbow Regal Rat, Harlan-Teklad or Mazuri.

**Treats:** Provide your rat with small pieces of fruit and veggies. It is fun and stimulating for your rat. Try broccoli (raw or cooked), tomatoes, cauliflower, lettuce (no iceberg), peas, cooked potato, cooked sweet potato, kale, radicchio, parsley, cooked corn (in moderation!), bananas, grapes, berries, apples, mango, kiwi etc. Of course rats love treats. As tempting as it is, only feed very small amounts and make sure the treats are low in salt, sugar and fat.

## Health Care

**Weekly Examination:** Unfortunately, rats don't live very long. The average life span is 2 1/2 - 3 years. The sad part about owning pet rats is the health issues. Make sure you have a vet who is knowledgeable with rats. Do a weekly examination of your rat. This only takes a few minutes (you can do this while you pet or play with him). Rats can get quite costly in terms of medical care. Please don't get rats if you know you won't be able or willing to treat them. They deserve proper care and treatment like any other pet!

**Changes in Behavior:** Watch his general behavior: Is he alert or lethargic? You know your rat's personality and a change in behavior could be an indication of a health problem.

**Dental Checks:** A rat's teeth should be yellow/orange. If your rat is having a hard time chewing or is losing weight, your rat might have overgrown teeth. Since rats' teeth grow constantly, you may have to trim them regularly (your vet can show you how).

**Scratching:** If your rat is scratching excessively, he could have lice, fleas or mites. You can see fleas and lice but mites only under the microscope. Patches of fur missing and scabs can also be an indication of these parasites.

**Respiratory Disease:** The most common health problem in rats is respiratory disease. Watch your rat for signs of excessive sneezing, wheezing, labored breathing and/or gasping for air. Ammonia (from urine) can aggravate therefore cleaning the cage regularly is a must! Most respiratory infections can be treated with antibiotics. Since rats have a very delicate respiratory system, don't smoke around your rat, use strong perfume, incense, pine or cedar shavings, air freshener or harsh chemicals.

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## Bringing Them Home

When you bring your furry friends home, make sure that the cage, accessories, food and water are ready. Put your rats into the cage and let them explore. You can watch them for a while but then give them several hours (over night) to get used to their new surroundings and smells.

Next day you can continue by opening the cage door and placing your hand by the door and talking to them. Curious as rats are they will most likely come over and check out your hand. Let them explore you and sniff your hand. Later, you can put treats on your hand (like whole-wheat cheerios) and soon they will associate that yummy treats come from your hand. In the beginning, avoid putting your hand inside the cage. The rats might get scared and feel "cornered" and might nip. Remember that rats are predators but also prey! The next step is to interact with them outside the cage (the bathroom or bed is a good place for that). Take a blanket, treats and a hidey house or cardboard box with you.

Please be kind and patient! Never punish your rat (scream at him, flick his nose, squeeze, shake or pick him up by the tail)! You would only lose his trust.

## Shopping List

- Cage:** Minimum size 18 x 24 x 30" We really like the Martin's R-695 (available online at [www.martinscages.com](http://www.martinscages.com)). Bar spacing of 1/2-3/4" is best, but 1" spacing can be OK for large males. Another great cage is the Ferret Nation Model 140 or 142 (best pricing at [www.ferret.com](http://www.ferret.com)).
- Bedding:** If you use a litter-type bedding, CareFresh, Kaytee Soft Sorbent, Sun Seed Naturals, and Aspen shavings are all good choices. Never use pine or cedar shavings--they contain toxic oils that are poisonous to your rat. Some people opt to use all cloth bedding- -fleece, old T-shirts, towels, etc rather than litter, and this can be a good option as well. Most finds that a combination of the two works well. For instance, I put litter in the bottom tray and in a corner litter pan on one of the shelves of the cage, and place cloth bedding on the rest of the cage shelves to soften the wire and provide nesting opportunities.
- Litter Pan:** A medium sized corner litter pan or two, filled with one of the litters listed above (do not use clay cat litter), can be placed within the cage to encourage your rat to become litter trained. Select a corner that your rat uses frequently, and move any 'accidents' into the pan as they happen.
- Hide Box:** Your rat will need at least one, preferably 2-3 different nesting enclosures within his cage in order to satisfy his natural need to nest, and to keep him feeling safe and stress- free. Good options include: large plastic igloo, plastic waffle block houses, plastic chinchilla dust baths, custom made cloth 'cubes' , cardboard boxes, large PVC pipe. baskets, wooden houses, and grass huts can be used as well, but must be replaced frequently because they will absorb urine and cannot be cleaned and sanitized properly.
- Food Dishes:** Medium sized heavy, ceramic crocks, or hard plastic dishes that lock onto the side of the cage (e.g. Lock-Crock) work best to prevent spilling and soiling of food. You will need to have several dishes for feeding both your rat's staple diet (see below), and a variety of fresh foods each day.
- Water Bottle:** 8, 12, or 16 oz glass or plastic water bottle. It is nice to keep an extra on hand so you can exchange for a clean one when it has to be washed and sanitized weekly. Glass works better for rats that are avid chewers.
- Toys:** Rats are intelligent, inquisitive creatures that enjoy chewing and exploring. Provide plenty of rat safe toys, including: hanging wooden bird toys with bell, empty food and tissue boxes, paper towel rolls, untreated wicker baskets, untreated wooden chew toys, small stuffed animals, kitty jingle balls, etc. Be creative, but always keep safety in mind--feel free to contact us if you are not sure if a toy is safe for your rat.
- Exercise Wheel:** Some rats really enjoy running in an exercise wheel, and others do not. Be sure to choose a solid surface wheel (Wodent Wheel, Silent Spinner, etc) and be sure you purchase the correct size (usually 'large' depending on the brand). Wheels with bars are not recommended due to an increased risk of tail and leg injuries.
- Food:** As a base/staple diet, we recommend a homemade mixture that incorporates a couple of brands of high quality formulated foods (Mazuri's Rat and Mouse Diet and Oxbow's Regal Rat). Seed mixes should be fed in limited quantities as treats, in order to encourage consumption of all elements (not just favored items like sunflower seeds). More appropriate treats include fresh fruits and veggies, pastas, low sugar cereals, yogurt, lean meat or egg--pretty much anything that is healthy for you (low salt, sugar, and fat), is good in small amounts for your rat. Avoid anything with caffeine, large amounts of peanut butter (choking hazard), most dairy products, alcohol, and carbonated beverages.

**Not Recommended:** Exercise balls, plastic cages, aquariums, bedding containing pine or cedar, seed-based diets or treat sticks.

