

ANIMAL RESCUE LEAGUE of BOSTON



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Pet Rat Basics

Pet rats (also known as fancy rats) are clean, playful and intelligent animals that love human company and attention. Rats can learn their name, come when called, and perform a variety of tricks. Well-kept rats will live about 3 to 4 years and do best when kept in pairs or groups.

Housing

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 you should get the largest cage you can afford. Adult rats can also be housed in a large multi-level ferret cage. The cage should be lined with bedding, but do not use cedar or pine chips, which contain oils that are dangerous to rats. Rats love hammocks, branches and ropes for climbing. They also need a place to hide and sleep, such as an igloo, flower pot or shoebox.

Droppings, uneaten food and soiled areas of bedding should be removed from your pets' cage every day. Clean the cage completely twice a week by replacing dirty bedding and scrubbing down the rest of the cage with warm, soapy water.

Diet/Feeding

High-quality rat blocks should be available to your pet at all times. Avoid seed mixes, as many rats will pick out their favorite bits and leave the rest behind. Offer small amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables to your rats every day. Peas, broccoli, carrots, apples and bananas are good foods to start with, but it's fun to try new things and find out your pets' favorites. Rats love people food, and you can give yours the occasional table scrap, such as cooked pasta, small pieces of egg or chicken, or a bit of pizza crust. Treats should be limited to prevent obesity. Do not give your rat chocolate, corn, candy, caffeinated and carbonated beverages, onions, or sticky foods such as taffy and peanut butter. Fresh, clean water should be available at all times. A water bottle with a drinking tube that attaches to the side of the cage is preferable to a bowl of water which could be tipped over.

Like all rodents, a rat's front teeth grow continuously. Provide unpainted, untreated pieces of wood, dog biscuits or cardboard tubes and boxes to chew on to prevent overgrown teeth.

General Care

Grooming: Rats are very clean and rarely need baths, but can be spot cleaned with a damp washcloth or unscented baby wipes, if needed.

Health Care: While rats do not need vaccinations, a once yearly checkup is recommended to make sure your rat is healthy. Common signs that something isn't right with your rat include sneezing, lethargy, weight loss, dull eyes, fur loss, scabbing, diarrhea and difficulty breathing. Rats are particularly susceptible to external parasites (such as mites), upper respiratory infections, malocclusion (overgrown teeth), ear infections, skin lesions, and mammary tumors.

Socializing: Rats are friendly and curious by nature, but you'll need to get your pets used to you—and used to being handled. You can help a nervous rat learn to trust you by using food. As your rats learn that they get good treats for being with you, they will be more willing to come out and be held. Start by feeding them small treats, such as cheerio's, at the cage door. Never feed them through the bars of the cage, as your rats may get into the habit of grabbing anything that's poked in—even fingers. Gradually make your rat come out further and further to get the treat. When you get to know each other better, don't be surprised if your little friends want to snuggle and be petted. Once your rats are hand-tamed, you should let them play outside of the cage in a safe, secure area for an hour or so every day. This out-of-cage playtime is highly recommended—and will keep your smart, active friends mentally stimulated and physically fit. Just be sure to supervise at all times.

Picking up your rat: When picking up a rat, you should never grab him or her by the tail. This is very uncomfortable to them, makes them feel unsafe, and does not help in their socialization. Tails have also been known to break off or lose skin with improper handling. Skin that has come off the tail cannot be reattached, nor will the tail grow back. Amputation of the tail tip is often required. You should always pick up a rat around its middle, and then support their feet with your other hand or your body. This makes them feel very secure and reduces the chance of someone dropping them if they squirm. Rats that are regularly lifted by their tails tend to harbor a distrust of humans and may not make the best pets.

Male or female: Both sexes make wonderful pets. Females are smaller and considerably more active than males and their fur is softer. On the other hand, males are normally happier sitting on your lap and having you scratch their head. While this is generally the case, each rat has his or own individual personality.

Fun Facts

- The name fancy rat derives from the idea of animal fancy or the phrase “to fancy” (to like or appreciate).
- A group of rats is called a mischief.
- Unlike many other “pocket pets” rats genuinely enjoy the company of their human caretakers, and will often run to the front of the cage whenever a human enters the room.
- A happy rat will chatter or grind its teeth, called bruxing. Often, bruxing results in “vibrating” eyes, called boggling. This is caused by the lower jawbone pressing the backs of the eyes. This is a good sign, regardless of how silly it looks.
- Research has shown that rats make a laughter-like noise (unable to be heard by the human ear alone) when tickled.

Further Information...

Rat and Mouse Club of America - www.rmca.org/

Fat Rat Central - fatratcentral.com/

The Dapper Rat - www.dapper.com.au/index.htm

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