

HOW TO CARE FOR YOUR RAT(S)

Congratulations on becoming a rat guardian! Adding another member to your family is a **big commitment and responsibility**. Your rat is **100 percent dependent** on you for everything – healthy food, fresh water, a clean home, a stress-free environment, exercise, playtime, medical attention and **LOTS OF LOVE!** These are the ingredients vital to the health and well-being of this animal that boasts a long and prodigious record of survival. You owe it to your rat to learn everything you can about its care. It is your responsibility to understand its needs. **A rat must not simply be locked in a cage and ignored.** Please don't add to your orphaned rat's prior misery by not taking proper care of it. **If you are not going to commit to playing with your rat every day, then you are not the proper guardian for a rat.**

The following information is meant to be a **starting block** for a responsible pet guardian new to rats. Please take the time to learn more about these animals through **books and Web sites**. Also, keep in mind that there is **misinformation** out there too. Just because you read or hear something does not mean it is true. Please use your **common sense**, and if you're not sure, just ask.

A word about breeding

No one should ever breed rats unless they are experts in genetics. Inbreeding can lead to serious medical problems in the general rat population. In addition, breeding contributes to the problem of small animal overpopulation. There are plenty of rats sold at pet stores who are eventually orphaned and abandoned at animal shelters. Visit your local shelter or rescue instead of breeding your own. If you're really interested in the miracle of raising babies, ask to foster a pregnant rat. You can experience all the joys of seeing the babies grow up, and you are contributing to the greater good of the rescue community. Now that is something to feel good about!

Support orphaned rats!

Rats make wonderful pets and yet they have a bad reputation as mean and dirty creatures. Pet stores contribute to the problem of pet overpopulation and abandonment by housing rats in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions and giving the public too little information on their care. You have taken the first step toward solving this problem by adopting your own orphaned rat. Please continue to support orphaned rats by referring friends and family to your local animal shelter or rescue to adopt a rat. Ask them to be a part of the solution, not the problem. Just like dogs, cats and people, rats deserve second chances too!

ABOUT RATS

Before we get into caring for rats, we'll take a look in this section at some interesting facts about them, as well as how they came to be pets here in the United States.

History

The rat-human relationship began hundreds of years ago when humans began growing and storing grain, and rats learned to feed off these stores and take shelter in human dwellings rather than fend for themselves. At the same time, humans learned to keep rats as pets.

The Brown or Norway rat, *Rattus norvegicus*, is the species domesticated into what we recognize as Fancy or pet rats. At one time in Victorian England, fighting a dog with rats was even a popular pastime! In the late 1800s, rats were bred in captivity for scientific research into nutrition, intelligence and disease. It was noted in the labs that the rat was highly suited as a pet due to its intelligence and tameness. By the late 1800s, rats were kept in captivity as pets. By 1901, enough unusual colors and patterns had turned up through breeding that there was an interest in them as desirable exhibition animals, and thus the rat fancy was born.

Today, the Fancy Rat is equivalent to a purebred dog. People have discovered that they are **bright, intelligent, affectionate and gentle**. They don't bite, bark or leave fur all over the house, and they are relatively easy to care for. Please note that contrary to popular opinion, **the rat was not responsible for the Black Plague**. It was fleas on the rats that carried the disease – and black rats, not brown rats, were the carriers.

General information

* In the wild, the brown rat lives in groups in burrows or sewers, sleeping during the day and waking at dusk.

* In captivity, the rat is a **sociable pet** and is much happier living with another of its own kind and gender if introduced when young. An older rat, especially males, may resent the addition of another rat of the same gender and a serious fight may occur. Rats establish an order of **hierarchy** and so one rat will be dominant over another. Rats in captivity are also **nocturnal**.

* Rats live **two to three years** on average.

* The average body length of adult rats is **9 to 11 inches**, with an average tail length of **7 to 9 inches**. They weigh **250 to 500 grams** when full-grown. Their heart rate is **250-450 beats** per minute and they take **70 to 115 breaths** per minute. They eat 10 to 15 grams of food per day and drink about 10 to 12 ml of water daily.

* Rats rarely bite or scratch. In fact, a rat is **less likely to bite than the average dog**.

* **They can be trained to play basketball!**

PREPARING FOR YOUR RAT

Before you bring home your new rats, you'll want to get everything ready for them so that when they arrive you can simply place them in their new home. In this section we'll discuss what you'll need to purchase for your rats and how to get your home ready for them.

Housing

Your rats will appreciate a cage with **lots of room**. Think about it. Would you prefer to live in a closet or a three-story house? There are lots of options out there for rat cages. Buy the largest one you can afford, and fill it with lots of interesting things – just like you would want lots of things to occupy your time in your house, especially if that is where you spent most of your time.

The basic requirement for housing is a **simple, gnaw-proof cage, terrarium or screen-topped aquarium**. In this section we'll discuss these options.

* The best type of cage for a rat or pair of rats is the **Mariocho Tommy 102**, which is actually designed for guinea pigs. It leaves **lots of room** for your rats to mess around in, two igloos and plenty of toys.

* Or, if you have a little more money to spend, you could buy a **multi-level ferret cage**. Rats will appreciate having a place to climb – and they like hammocks, as we'll discuss later.

* If you go with an **aquarium**, it should be **at least 20 gallons** in size. After all, rats are 9 to 11 inches long, with 7 to 9 inch long tails. So their body will take up much of a 10-gallon cage – especially if there are two. (Please note that there are **mixed opinions** on whether aquariums are suitable housing for rats.)

* **Powder-coated wire rat cages** with solid metal shelves and plastic cat pan bottoms are easy to clean, and rats love having the levels to climb on. However, be aware that if wire shelves are in the cage, they should be made of 0.5 inch by 0.5 inch wire. A rat's legs can be caught in wire measuring 1 inch by 0.5 inch.

* **Plastic cages such as Habitrails and Crittertrails are NOT recommended for rats**. They are designed for smaller rodents such as hamsters. The tubes are too small for full-grown rats to climb through and do not provide adequate space for the rat to move around.

The cage should be placed **away from drafts, vents, direct sunshine, televisions and stereos**. Rats are comfortable in the same temperatures as humans, **65 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit**.

Bedding

Once you've selected a cage, it's time to select bedding to place in the cage. Your rats will need bedding to absorb urine and provide them with a comfortable place to rest.

Cover the cage of the floor with **two to three inches of bedding**. **CareFRESH bedding** is the best type to buy for your rats. It is made from recycled wood pulp and it is extremely absorbent. Most important, it does not contain the **harmful phenols** found in softwood shavings such as cedar.

CEDAR SHAVINGS SHOULD NEVER BE USED; THEY CAUSE ALLERGIES AND INFECTIONS. If you do use wood-based shavings, use only aspen or unscented, kiln-dried pine. Never use sawdust, newspaper, corn cob bedding or cat litter.

Other cage accessories

* Water bottle: Use an **8-oz. minimum water bottle** and **change the water daily**. Use only water bottles that are regulated by a **ball bearing**. Holders are available to fix the bottle to the side of an aquarium. **Do not use a water dish**, which can become spilled. If your rat goes without water for long it faces the risk of **dehydration**. When you fill the water bottle each day, run your finger over the tip of the sipping tube to make sure that water is coming out and it is working. If not, it is time to purchase a new bottle.

* Food dishes: **Rats do not require food dishes**. Placing food on the floor of the cage encourages the rat's natural instinct to forage. If you use a food dish, it should be easy to clean and sturdy to prevent tipping.

* Sleeping house: Your rats will also need a **sleeping house** to take cover under. Plastic "igloos" and timber "hideaways" are recommended – as are simple cardboard boxes with holes cut for entrances.

* **Nesting material** should be placed inside your rats' sleeping house. The best material to use is **unscented and undyed toilet or tissue paper**. **NEVER USE THE COMMERCIAL FLUFFY OR WOOL BEDDING SOLD IN PET STORES.** It causes stomach blockages if ingested and it can become wrapped around limbs, cutting off circulation. Rats have died or had to have limbs amputated because of fluffy bedding.

* Toys: Rats will appreciate toys such as **boxes, ladders, shelves, tubes and wooden bird toys**. They also like hammocks to take a snooze in! You can make a hammock out of an old sock and two pieces of rope. Cut the toes off the sock. Thread it over the ropes and tie the ends of the ropes to the cages. Your rat has found a new favorite napping spot! Let your imagination run wild when devising toys for your rats. Many safe, non-toxic household items can double as rat toys.

* Wheel: Some rats will appreciate having an exercise wheel; however, not all rats enjoy a wheel so it's OK if your rat shows no interest in it. **NEVER BUY THE RUNGED WIRE OR PLASTIC WHEELS SOLD IN PET STORES.** The exercise wheel should be made from **one solid plastic piece**. Spaces between the rungs of the wheel can be dangerous traps for your rat. His leg could fall through a rung and break. Only purchase a wheel designed for a rat. Wheels made for hamsters and gerbils are too small for rats and can result in dangerous spinal deformities. We recommend the **extra-large Comfort Wheel** sold online at www.theferretstore.com.

* Chewing: Finally, place a **toilet paper tube or paper towel tube** in your rats' cage. They will nibble on it and tunnel through it. Keeping your rats "in cardboard" will satisfy their chewing instincts and help keep their teeth trim. Other items your rat can nibble are Nylabones (use sparingly), shelled nuts, cooked chicken bones, wood blocks soaked in fruit juice, baby teething rusks (vegetable flavor), dog biscuits (low-fat, low-protein), wine corks, ice cream sticks and wooden chopsticks.

HANDLING

You've got the rats' new home all set up, so in this section we will explain what to do with your rats (basically, play, play, play).

Rats are so **intelligent** that they can be taught to respond to their name and even do **tricks** such as playing basketball, doing "Rat Olympics" and completing complicated, intricate mazes.

Give your new rat about **a week to adjust** to his new home and family. That means you should **hand feed** your rat as much as possible for the first few days, so that each time you handle or approach him, he has a **positive reward** waiting from you.

Start by placing your hand in the cage and letting your rat approach you on her own by smelling and walking around. **Be gently and talk softly**. She might not take the food right away – you might have to leave your hand in the cage for a few minutes. The next step is holding your treat just outside the cage so that your pet must reach out and get it.

If you want your rat to learn her name, call her by name whenever you take her out to play, and give her a treat like a Cheerio. Hand her the Cheerio the first few times and say, "Holly, come," and hold the Cheerio a little bit away, increasing the distance each time. Your rat will learn her name and also the command "come." Each time you end a training session, your rat should have gone a little farther than before. Eventually when you make a noise or call her name, she will try to go to you wherever you are, and at this point you can stop rewarding her with food each time.

Rats will soon learn to **shoulder sit**. Your shoulder will be your rat's second home! Place her up there for small amounts of time at first and give her small treats. Sit quietly by her cage. Gradually increase the time she spends there. Before you know it you'll be walking around with a shoulder buddy!

After you've completed these bonding exercises, you'll be ready to let your rat out on the floor for some supervised playtime. **Confine the play area to a bed, couch or chair**. This is a good time to bring out some of the toys you've purchased or "recycled" for your rats. One popular item is a maze made from large PVC pipes sold at home improvement stores. Some of the pipes are jointed and some are straight, and they can be connected in a variety of patterns. Just make sure that when you have your rat out, you give her a "safe" area to run to, such as her igloo or nesting box. This will allow her to take cover if startled or just to take a little rest.

Do not purchase the run-about balls sold in pet stores for your rat. These are designed for hamsters. Most rats become frightened when placed in such a ball.

There is no end to the fun you can have with your rats! For great suggestions on some games to play with your rats, visit www.members.aol.com/juliesrats/e4nindex.html.

ROUTINE CARE

In this section, we'll examine what you need to do to care for your rats on a regular basis.

Feeding

First and foremost on the list is, of course, feeding. Food should be available at all times. **Laboratory pellets** such as Lab Blox, Rodent Chow, or Pet Blocks are the best. You can find them in pet shops or feed stores in small quantities. If they are not available in your area, you may have to ask the store owner or manager if they can get them if not normally stocked. You can also feed a **high quality dog food** with not more than 8 percent fat content, including Nutro, Science Diet and Iams, **fed equally with a rat grain mixture**.

Whatever you choose, food should be supplemented with a small amount of **fruits or vegetables daily**. Complement your rat's diet with small amounts of salad greens, fresh fruits (rats love bananas and avocado given in small amounts) and vegetables (raw broccoli and corn-on-the-cob are a favorite with rats). Any fresh food should be **washed** when necessary, and be sure to clean out any uneaten fresh foods the next day. One way to encourage your rat to play is to place the fruits and veggies in a paper towel, close the towel up and clip it to the top of the cage. Your rat will have a great time trying to get the food out, somewhat like a pinata!

The following fruits and vegetables **can** be fed to rats:

seedless apples	kiwi
bananas (small amounts occasionally)	lettuce (small amounts occasionally)
broccoli	mango
brussel sprouts (small amounts occasionally)	parsley
carrots	peas
cauliflower leaves and stalks	romaine lettuce
cucumber	tomato
grapes	

The following fruits and vegetables should **never** be fed to rats:

kidney beans	rhubarb and rhubarb leaves
onion	tomato leaves
potato and potato tops	

Be sparing with oily seeds, nuts and grain mixes. Don't ever give your rats treats such as candy, cookies, potato chips, garlic, onions, rabbit mix, raw kidney beans, sweets, toffee or other junk food. You should also stay away from rat treats sold at pet stores that are high in sugar and fat (an example is Yogurt Drops). Too much of these treats can lead to obesity.

Treats such as dry, healthy, low-sugar cereals (Cheerios, puffed white rice/millet, spoon-size shredded wheat), plain popcorn, wild bird seed, dry oatmeal and occasional table scraps such as salad or spaghetti are OK – and will be eagerly devoured by your rat!

The following treats are also appropriate for rats:

biscuits	scrambled or boiled eggs
boiled potatoes	cooked fish or meat
bread (whole wheat)	raisins
cooked chicken	sultanas
cheese in small amounts	toast
currants	

Rats need fresh food and water each day. You wouldn't want to pick at stale food and drink warm water, would you? And don't forget to double-check that water bottle when you are filling it up each day!

Exercise

In addition to fresh food and water, rats also need **handling and exercise each day** (hey, people need exercise too!) Be gentle when picking up your rat. Make sure she is fully awake first. Do not grab or poke and **NEVER EVER** pull a rat's tail or pick your rat up by her tail– it is jointed and you could cause severe and painful damage by snapping it. Keep your rat close to a safe surface when handling her. A fall could be very harmful.

Health

When you have your rat out each day, check her over for health problems. Look for listlessness, runny eyes or nose, sneezing, wheezing, rattling, thin condition, ruffled stand-up coat, hunched posture, diarrhea, bloated belly, cuts or open wounds and growths. A healthy rat will be curious and active, have a sleek, glossy coat and be in good body weight. **If your rat should develop medical problems it is your responsibility as her guardian to take her to the vet – just as you would your child.**

All domesticated rats have “**The Evil Myco:**” They are all infected with the organism **mycoplasma pulmonis**, and there is no way to get rid of it. In times of weakness or stress, a rat may get sick and show the effects of mycoplasmosis: **respiratory problems and weight loss leading to death**. To avoid the clinical signs of mycoplasmosis, take the following precautions. Keep stress to a minimum; keep ammonia and urine levels low by using an absorbent bedding; give them a quality diet, exercise, fresh water and clean cage; make life interesting by getting them out of their cage often; enrich their environment by adding toys, bags, boxes and rags; avoid dusty bedding; and don't use aromatic beddings like cedar.

In addition to mycoplasmosis, **depression** is another effect of an uninspiring environment. Rats are so social that they love to always be around their humans. If you are not committed to playing with your rat several times a day, the rat is not the right pet for you.

Cleaning

The cage should be cleaned at least once a week. Old bedding should be removed. The cage should be cleaned with a mild dish solution and water, then dried with a paper towel. Fresh bedding and nesting material should be placed in the cage.

It's the beginning of a beautiful friendship ...

Once you understand that rats bite rarely, and then out of fear and not anger, and learn how easy it is to handle and care for them, you are ready to begin a delightful relationship! **Occasionally fingers poked through a wire or fingers that smell like food** are the only instances when a rat will bite.

Remembering this and taking precautions like **washing your hands** before handling your rat will ensure a safe experience.

Other resources

You're just beginning your education on the Fancy Rat. Please visit the following recommended books and Web sites to learn even more about your new pet and join the larger rat community:

Books:

"Rats! (A Fun & Care Book)" by Debbie Ducommun (Bowtie Press)

"Rat Health Care" by Debbie Ducommun (self-published)

"Training Your Pet Rat" by Gerry Bucsis and Barbara Somerville (Barron's)

"The Rat (An Owner's Guide to a Happy Healthy Pet)" by Ginger Cardinal (Howell Book House)

Web sites:

The American Fancy Rat and Mouse Association, www.afirma.org

The Rat and Mouse Club of America, www.rmca.org

Julie's Rats: www.members.aol.com/juliesrats/e4nindex.html

Virginia's Rats: www.interlog.com/~audiotre/rats