

Rat Care Information

Rats are smart, clean and engaging animals. They live an average of two and a half years. Rats have poor eyesight but good hearing and a good sense of smell. Rats are nocturnal. They prefer to sleep during the day, and they need attention and playtime in the evening. Rats are very social animals and need the companionship of their own species. It is unnatural for them to live alone. Rats should always be kept in at least pairs whenever possible -- either the same gender or spayed and neutered. Rats enjoy grooming together, eating together, playing together, curling up to sleep together, and just being together. Introductions between single rats can be successful if handled properly and patiently. For more information about introducing rats, check out:

http://ratguide.com/care/behavior/introducing_rats.php

<http://www.ratfanclub.org/newrat.html>

HOUSING

There is no such thing as a habitat that is too big. Your rats will be spending a majority of their time in their cage, so it should be as big as possible. It should be safe, roomy, comfortable and interesting. The cage should provide a minimum of two and a half cubic feet of space per rat housed in the cage.

Any levels in the cage should be covered with a solid material. Animals should never be made to stand on wire. Standing on wire is extremely painful and will cause wounds, sores, foot deformities and arthritis. Wire levels can be made safe by covering them with Magic Mats (available in pet stores), ceramic or vinyl tiles, cardboard (like cereal boxes), coroplast, plexiglass, or other similar materials.

Many pet stores market cages that are inappropriate for rats. Rat cages need to be large, secure, and sturdy. Cages with plastic or wood structural components, large bar spacing (more than 1/2"), insecure connections between base and wire portion, and small or easily opened doors are not recommended. We recommend Martin's Cages and Midwest Critter Nation cages.

The website for Martin's Cages is www.martinscages.com. They are located in PA and ship quickly. We require at least a R-680 Rat Lodge or R-695 Rat Skyscraper. Powder coated cages last longer than galvanized cages and are nicer on little rat paws. The wire levels of Martin's Cages need to be covered with a safe solid material such as pieces of vinyl floor tiles or ceramic tiles. (Note: Martin's cages is currently closed due to ownership changes, used cages can sometimes be purchased)

The Midwest Critter Nation 161 (single unit) and the 162 (double unit) are also highly recommended. (Not to be confused with the Ferret Nation.) The Critter Nation is available from several online retailers and prices vary.

Check out "The Grotto" at <http://www.dapper.com.au/grotto.htm> for the ultimate in rat housing inspiration!

Rats should never be kept in aquariums. Aquariums are not large enough. They do not provide proper ventilation, do not allow for adequate enrichment items and they isolate your rats from their environment.

Not sure if your cage is big enough? Use the Fancy Rats Cage Calculator to figure out how many rats a habitat will house. Remember to click on 2.5 cubic feet and click on Imperial (inches) before calculating.

<http://www.fancyratsforum.co.uk/calculator/cagecalc.html>

Make sure to clean your rats' habitat often to prevent a build up of urine and feces. Rats have very sensitive respiratory systems which can easily become irritated from living in a dirty cage. In addition to replacing the bedding, you will also want to periodically take the entire cage and hose it down or place it in the shower under hot water to rinse urine off of the levels, sides and ramps. Don't forget to flip the cage over and rinse off the underside of ramps and levels too. This is essential in controlling a build up of urine on the ramps and greatly reduces odor.

BEDDING

We recommend Carefresh bedding. It is the safest and healthiest bedding choice for your rats. It is made from recycled wood pulp and is available at most pet stores. Aspen bedding is an acceptable second choice. Never use pine, cedar, sawdust, corn cob bedding, chlorophyll bedding or cat litter. Pine and cedar are actually poisonous to all animals!

A note on fabric bedding - Many rat parents use fabric or fleece bedding in their cages. Small Angels only recommends fleece fabric bedding when it is backed with an absorbent layer (such as uhaul pads) and the cage also must contain a dig box. Fabric bedding is a viable option with the above provisions taken however, the cage will need to be cleaned 1-3 times a week depending on number of rats and if they are litter box trained.

HIDE-AWAY

Rats enjoy a cozy space for sleeping and relaxation. Provide a plastic igloo or other similar hide-away. If your rats chew excessively on their plastic igloo, you can substitute cardboard boxes with a cut out doorway for them. Wooden hide-aways are not recommended for rats. They can be difficult to clean and can hold odor. Use paper towels or old t-shirts/sheets for nesting material. Do not use the commercial "fluff" from the store. It is unsafe. Commercial fluff can become wrapped around limbs and/or bind up in an animal's intestines if swallowed.

HAMMOCKS

Rats LOVE hammocks and cubes and they are a must for every rat habitat. Hammocks can be found through many retailers, often marketed towards ferrets and sugar gliders. Many homemade hammocks are also available on Etsy and eBay.

WATER

Use a 16 ounce (minimum) hanging water bottle that has an angled stainless steel sipper tube with a ball bearing in the spout. A glass water bottle is preferable, but a plastic water bottle is acceptable. Give your rats fresh water everyday. Filtered water is strongly recommended, especially if you are on city water.

FOOD

Provide a ceramic food dish. Do not use plastic. We recommend having at least two ceramic bowls – one bowl for dry food and a separate bowl for wet/fresh foods (for larger groups, multiple food bowls should be used to make sure everyone has easy access). We recommend Oxbow Essentials Adult Rat Food as the base dry diet for rats. Oxbow provides a complete balanced diet for rats and is manufactured to meet the nutritional needs of rats (15% protein, 4% fat). Below are some similar and acceptable alternatives:

Science Selective Complete Rat & Mouse Food: Contains 14% protein and 4% fat

<https://supremepetfoods.com/us/products/science-selective-rat-mouse-food/>

Mazuri lab blocks (#5M30 formula): Contains 16% protein and 6% fat

<http://www.mazuri.com/mazurirodentbreeder6f50lb-5m30.aspx>

*Young rats (under 9 months old) do require additional protein, but this can easily be added as a part of their daily fresh meal.

DO NOT use any Kaytee, Hartz, L&M or Nutriphase food products. They contain a controversial antioxidant preservative called Ethoxyquin which is linked to cancer, organ damage, birth defects and other serious health problems.

Rats need and benefit from a widely varied diet that includes **daily** fresh vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and protein sources. The more natural foods, the better. Rats enjoy a variety of fresh vegetables. Rats often enjoy, among other things, asparagus, avocado, basil, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, celery, corn (fresh or canned), cucumber, eggs (scrambled or hard boiled), oatmeal (made with milk), okra, parsley, peas, red pepper, spinach, sprouts, squash, sweet potato (cooked) and tomatoes.

Fresh fruit can be used as a treat. Rats often enjoy, among other things, apples, bananas, blueberries, cherries (pitted), cranberries, grapes, kiwi, melon, papaya, peaches, pears, pineapple, plums and strawberries. Please note that male rats should not have citrus (lemon, lime, orange, and grapefruit).

Rats may also enjoy whole oats, spray millet, cooked brown rice, cooked pasta, whole wheat bread, coconut, pumpkin seeds, flax seeds, sesame seeds, tofu (packaged, not bulk) and cooked potatoes.

AVOID: wild insects, iceberg lettuce (may cause diarrhea if eaten in large quantities), dried corn, raw dry beans, potato eyes, green potato, raw potato, raw sweet potato, green parts of tomatoes, green bananas, rhubarb, onion, garlic, bulk tofu (packaged is fine), peanut butter (sticky texture causes a choking hazard), carbonated drinks, processed foods and any sugary, spicy, or salty foods. Male rats should not have citrus fruits/products. Use common sense when feeding your rats and introduce new foods slowly. (Rats can not burp or throw up.)

Do not give your rats a mineral or salt wheel. They are not necessary or healthy. Mineral and salt wheels are made with glue, and salt wheels are bleached. You can give your rats natural wood chews that have not been artificially colored and/or apple branches from apple trees that have been dried at least three months and have not been sprayed with pesticides.

EXERCISE and PLAY

Some rats will use an exercise wheel and some will not. If you choose to provide a wheel, it should be at least 12 inches in diameter (15 inches in diameter for large rats). It should provide a solid running surface. Never use an exercise wheel with metal or plastic bars/rungs. Their feet, legs and/or tail can slip between the rungs, get caught and break. We recommend the Wobust Wodent Wheel, the Giant Comfort Wheel, the Giant Silent Spinner or the Chin Spin. All of the wheels are available on-line, and Comfort Wheels and Silent Spinners can be found in most pet stores.

Rats need and enjoy time out of their habitat everyday to run around. They should get at least an hour out of their cage everyday but more is better. You can let them run around a rat-proofed room. Rats can easily get out of the fence-type playpens. Rats are very curious and smart. A busy rat is a happy rat. A bored rat will become depressed. Rats enjoy tunnels, hammocks, bird toys, dig boxes, nest boxes, ladders, paper bags, ropes, towel tents, stray socks, chew toys and more. Rotate toys every few days to keep life interesting. For lots of fun toy and activity ideas, visit www.dapper.com.au/toys.htm.

NEVER put your rats in a plastic exercise ball. Exercise balls are dangerous and stressful for all animals. Rodents have poor eyesight. In a ball their vision is even more limited. They always run into furniture and walls, which they don't see coming. It's like a car crash for them. They back up to try and get away and end up crashing into something else. It's very stressful. In addition, paws can get pinched/broken in the air slits. Animals can become over-heated. If they go to the bathroom in the ball, they have to run in their own waste. Furthermore, their great joy in life is exploring and checking things out with their paws and noses. They can't do that in a plastic bubble. Provide a large, safe play area for your rats and trash the ball!

HANDLING

Before you pick your rats up, make sure you have clean hands that do not smell like food. Make sure your rats are fully awake and aware of your presence. Scoop your rats up gently using both hands. NEVER pick your rats up by the tail, not even the base of the tail. It is painful, and the tail can break off or the skin can rip leaving exposed bone.

We welcome questions! Please email rats@smallangelsrescue.org for more information. You can see our adoptable animals online at www.smallangels.petfinder.com.

Websites:

www.dapper.com.au

www.petrats.org

www.ratbehavior.org

www.ratfanclub.org

www.rmca.org

www.ratsrule.com

www.ratguide.com

www.itsaratsworld.com

www.goosemoose.com

www.isamurats.co.uk/rat-information-and-care.html