



Rat Adoption Handbook



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CONGRATULATIONS!

Dear Rat Adopter,

Congratulations on your new family member! Bringing a new rat into your home—and your life—is a big commitment that comes with many benefits and joys. Thank for you choosing to adopt and save a life.

Rats truly have become part of our families; we buy them toys, we let them climb all over us, and we share our apartments and houses with them. For their own safety and health, we invite them into our homes and provide them with large, enriching enclosures.

Rats are relatively new to being recognized as the loving and engaging companion animals that they are. They are bright problem solvers, who need engaging toys and a large living space (larger than many pet-store cages). They are social beings, who require friends and time out of their enclosure to interact with you and your family. They are full of personality and have even been observed to laugh (higher than we can hear) when tickled.

So tickle your rat and provide lots of toys, attention, and a fun space to live. In return you will receive not only years of love, companionship, and enjoyment, but also better health and a longer life—at least statistically speaking.

For our part, we are committed to helping you make your new family member's transition into your life a success.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Scarlett, DVM
Co-President



Jason Walthall
Co-President

SET UP FOR SUCCESS

Meeting Your Rat's Needs

Adding any new family member, especially the four-legged kind, requires a certain amount of equipment and some adjustments to your home for everyone's safety and comfort.

Here's a list of must-have supplies for a great start with your new rat:

Basics

- Large, multi-level cage
- Hammock or hide-a-way
- Food
- Water bottle
- Ceramic food bowl
- Toys
- Litter box and litter

Training and Mental Stimulation

- Food dispensing toys
- Play-alone toys
- Exercise wheel
- Chew toys

Setting Up Your Home

Cage Requirements

The ideal place for your rat enclosure is a quiet, well-ventilated space. Rats need lots of space to run around and require a large cage with multiple levels. Wire cages are the most popular housing option, but some rat guardians make their own. Mice cages are not suitable cages, as they are far too small. Rats should be provided with a minimum of two cubic feet of space per rat, with an additional two cubic feet for each extra rat. It should be a large wire cage with multiple levels, a solid bottom to protect their feet, and thin bar spacing so your rats don't slip out. Powder coated cages are preferred because they don't absorb rat urine. Martin's brand cages are highly recommended.

Bedding

Use a safe bedding in your rat's cage to absorb urine and cut down on odors. We suggest either paper based bedding, such as Carefresh, Cellsorb, Alpha Dri, or Yesterday's News or wood-based bedding, such as aspen shavings. Towels, sheets, shredded paper, and t-shirts are a less expensive alternative to commercial bedding for rats. Never use pine or cedar shavings because they contain phenol compounds that cause liver and respiratory problems in rats. Stay away from clay-based, clumping litters as they can clog rats' internal organs.

If you choose to litter box train your rat, limit bedding to the litter box only, with towels elsewhere on enclosure floors for comfort.

Housing Accessories

Furnish the enclosure with a hide-a-way, a bed or hammock, a food bowl and water bottle, some play-alone toys, and a litter box as far away from the bed and food as possible. A water bottle meant for small animals is preferred to ensure that water stays clean and available. Keep track of

the level of water in the bottle and make sure the ball located in the sipper tube does not get stuck and prevent your rat from access.

Play and Training

Environmental enrichment through play and training means a healthier *and* happier rat. Rats are very intelligent and easy to train. Active rats with a stimulation-rich environment are less anxious, sleep more, and are more likely to maintain a healthy weight.

Rats need at least an hour outside of their cage a day to play and interact with you.

- Provide a multi-limb climbing tree or jungle gym
- Create a fort or tunnel maze using cardboard and/or PVC
- Create a dig box made of dirt and sprouted grass for your rat to dig and explore in
- Place frozen peas, corn, or carrots onto a shallow bowl or tray filled with a small amount of water (less than 1 inch) and allow your rat to fish for the treats
- Use an exercise wheel that is at least 11 inches in diameter (solid, rather than wire wheels are safer for rat feet)
- Train your rat to fetch, sit, shake, come when called, and other tricks

Mental Stimulation

Bored rats are a lot like children. Unless you give them something fun to do, they will make their own fun. Encourage your rat to be physically and mentally active by giving her a variety of toys, puzzles, and other brainteasers.

- Set up an obstacle course for your rat to negotiate to reach her food
- Provide plenty of chewing and shredding toys such as wood, cardboard, toilet paper rolls, Gumabones, or Nylabones
- Hide your rat's food in a foraging toy to allow her to work to retrieve it

Household Hazards

Remember, rats are curious by nature. Keep your rat safe from these common household hazards:

Poisons. Human medications (especially aspirin, acetaminophen, and NSAIDS), veterinary medications, insecticides, rodenticides, household cleaners, chemicals, and paints can all cause severe injury or death to rats.

Plants. Many plants are toxic to rats. Put your plants in areas your rat can't access.

Chemical rub-off. Use natural, nontoxic cleaners in your rat cage, such as diluted white vinegar. Rats are fastidious groomers and easily pick up chemical residue on their fur and paw pads from contact with harsh cleaning agents. Ammonia-based cleaners and phenol disinfectants are particularly dangerous.

Cords. Bundle up and hide any electrical wires or cords. Rats may find them tempting to chew on because their teeth never stop growing. Make sure to have appropriate toys for your rats to chew on, such as untreated wood blocks.

Unsafe hiding places. Block access to dangerous places for rats, such as behind stoves, refrigerators, washers, dryers, etc.

Rat Care

Grooming

Despite common misconceptions, rats are very clean animals by nature and meticulously groom themselves to maintain coat cleanliness. You will notice that your rat grooms herself many times during a day, especially when relaxed or after any experience that threatens her natural smell. Generally, a rat will lick her paws and use them to wash her face and ears, then move to nibbling and licking the fur on the rest of her body.

Your rat may require periodic nail trimming, which can be done carefully with human nail clippers. Ask your vet to demonstrate before trying this yourself. River rocks around her food dish may help your rat keep her nails filed down.

Food and Water

Use one food bowl (use ceramic or stainless steel, never plastic, which can cause an allergic reaction) or food-dispensing toy for each rat in the household. A water bottle is preferred over a water bowl to ensure water stays clean and available. Make sure your rat has a fresh supply of water every day. If you use tap water, be sure it is not fluorinated or chlorinated, which can cause brain damage in rats. You can use a water filter to remove the chlorine.

Note: Pay careful attention to how much food and water your rat eats and drinks. It's crucial for their health that rats eat and drink well and any loss of appetite should cause concern.

Medical Concerns

Rats hide illness very well, so watch carefully for signs of illness. Give your rat a daily health check by analyzing the following:

- **Breathing:** Respiratory infections are fairly common in rats, so it is important to listen for any signs of abnormal breathing, such as wheezing, congestion, or labored breathing.
- **Teeth:** A rat's upper teeth should be yellowish-orange and lower teeth should be yellow. Check your rat's teeth to make sure there isn't any major discoloration, gum swelling, redness, pus, or foul odor and that they are wearing evenly, straight across. Rat's teeth are always growing.
- **Eyes:** Your rat's eyes should be clear, without any cloudiness, bright, and free of discharge.
- **Ears:** Check your rat's ears for any discharge, growths, or foul odors.
- **Tail:** Check for signs of ringtail. Symptoms include a circular ring at the base of the tail, swelling, inflammation, and/or an oozing sore.
- **Feet:** Check for signs of bumble foot. Symptoms include raised, reddened tissue on the feet and open sores or ulceration, intermittent bleeding, and/or pus.
- **Movement:** Watch your rat walk and check for signs of limping, trembling, tilting, circling, weakness, or a hunched back.
- **Fur/Skin:** Check to see if your rat is excessively scratching and if your rat has any hair loss.
- **Color:** Your rat's feet, ears, and tail should be either pale or a heightened skin color.

Emergency visits to the Veterinarian

If you see any of the following symptoms, please take your rat to your veterinarian immediately:

- Diarrhea
- Significant weight change (in either direction) over a short period
- Loss of appetite
- Drinking much more or less than normal
- Lack of energy or sleeping more than usual
- Hunched posture
- Unusual swellings
- Skin conditions
- Change in coat appearance
- Limping
- Unusual bleeding
- Signs of pain, such as sensitivity to touch
- Runny eyes or nose
- Red staining around the eyes and nose
- Overgrown teeth

There could also be other signs of illness not on this list, and any change in behavior should alert you to the possibility of illness.

Annual Visit to the Veterinarian

Even healthy adult rats should have annual checkups, because many illnesses can be detected in their early stages. Be prepared, too, for emergencies. Have the name of emergency veterinary services handy, and know how to get there in a hurry if necessary.

Multi-Rat Households

If there are other rats in your household, a slow introduction is very important. For more information, see our *Introducing Rats* handout.

ARRIVING HOME WITH YOUR RAT

Pet rats can make wonderful companions for the right home! They are very interactive, social pets who love to be with their guardians as often as possible. However, it may be stressful for some rats to transition into a new home, so let your rat adjust to her new home and territory on her own. A calm, unhurried transition can prevent many stress-related behavior problems.

Here's how to do it:

The Ride Home

1. Provide a familiar scent to your rat, like a handful of their bedding or litter.
2. Keep your rat in the carrier during the trip home. She could easily get spooked and become loose in your vehicle.

The First Hour

1. When you arrive home, take the rat carrier into your rat's enclosure. If you haven't set up an enclosure yet, do so before opening the carrier.
2. Open the carrier and let your rat decide whether she wants to come out to explore. Please note your rat may stay inside the carrier for hours.
3. Whether or not she comes out of the carrier, leave your rat in the enclosure.

The First Few Days

Visit the cage often during the day, but let your rat decide the pace of interactions. Never force attention or petting on your rat.

When your rat is completely comfortable in her enclosure, is at home with everyone in the household, and is eating well, you can let your rat explore outside of the enclosure. Make sure any room you give your rat access to is enclosed and safe.

Tip: It's common for a rat to take a few days to adjust to her new home, but it could take several weeks or even months.

Going Forward: Creating a Routine

- Feed your rat the same brand of food at the same time every day.
- Set aside some time to play with your rat mornings and evenings (when rats are most active).
- Clean the litter box and enclosure at approximately the same time every day.
- Establish a noise and activity level for your household that isn't stressful to your rat.
- Feed your rat a healthy salad at the same time every day.
- Reward your rat consistently for behaviors you like, such as returning to her enclosure on command.

LIFE WITH YOUR RAT

Bonding With Your Pet Rat

Talk To Your Rat

Rats have relatively poor vision but an excellent sense of smell and hearing, so it is important to talk to your new rat and make sure she's awake before picking her up out of her enclosure. Speak softly and talk to her every time you are by her cage to get her used to your voice. Some rats need a bit slower of an approach than others. It is important to be patient—sit in front of your rat's enclosure and read her a story. Pay attention to signs that your rat is feeling more comfortable and secure in her new home. Signs include: self grooming, sniffing, eating or drinking, and playing.

Hand Feed

Once your rat exhibits these signs, it is okay to place your hand in your rat's cage to offer her a treat. Use something high value, like a banana chip or almond sliver, to encourage your rat to take the treat from your hand. You can speak quietly and encouragingly during this time.

Petting

Once your rat eats comfortably out of your palm and fingers, you can begin gently petting her. Most rats also like having their foreheads pet gently and some like scratches behind their ears. After your rat is fully comfortable with being handled, she should spend about one hour outside of her cage each day.

Tip: Never put your fingers right in front of your rat's mouth. She may think it is food and accidentally bite you.

Handling Your Rat

Follow proper handling practices with your rats to keep her safe and avoid accidental bites.

1. Move slowly and calmly, avoid quick hand movements
2. Place one hand around your rat's shoulders (behind the front legs)
3. Scoop your other hand under your rat's rear
4. Hold your rat close to your body and help her feel secure
5. When putting your rat back down, keep a secure hold on the rat until very close to the ground.

Never lift or restrain your rat by her tail. This is stressful and can cause injury.

Never reach into your rat's nesting area while she is sleeping.

Never stick your fingers through the cage bars.

Tip: Rats love to curl up in a blanket with you or go for a ride in the front pocket or hood of a sweatshirt.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Myth: Rats are dirty and stink.

Reality: Rats are extremely clean animals and with proper care have very little odor. Rats bathe themselves frequently. As long as you provide your rat with a clean cage and proper bedding, your rats should never smell unpleasant.

Myth: Rats spread diseases.

Reality: The list of zoonotic disease that rodents are capable of transmitting is long, realistically, most of these come from wild rodents, not domestic rodents. There are very few illnesses that can be transmitted from a domestic rat to a human.

Myth: Rats bite humans and are aggressive.

Reality: A properly socialized rat is not likely to bite. Like any pet, your rat should be considered a member of the family. Talk to her and interact with her regularly in a calm, gentle manner so she learns to trust and depend on you.

Myth: Rats can live with other rodents like mice or hamsters.

Reality: Rats should only be housed with other rats and not with rodents of other species. Rats will kill and eat insects, small birds, and other smaller rodents, rats should ONLY be housed with other rats.

Myth: Male rats cannot be introduced to other male rats.

Reality: Male rats can be introduced to other males. As long as proper introduction methods are used, it's possible to bond a pair of male rats (with compatible personalities) at any stage of life.

Myth: Rats are inexpensive to care for.

Reality: Not every veterinarian will treat rats. Therefore rat veterinary care can be quite expensive. Rats can be prone to developing respiratory problems, which can often be treated with antibiotics as prescribed by a veterinarian. Rats can also develop tumors, which must be surgically removed. Rats should be given the same consideration when they are ill as any companion animal.