

The most common rat species kept as a pet is Rattus norvegicus. Free-ranging Norway rats live in and about human habitations and on ships and have become naturalized by commerce in most parts of the world. The rats bred in captivity for several purposes — for feeding captive reptiles, for research in laboratories and sold as pets — are all fully domesticated descendants of the free-ranging Norway rat.

Pet rats come in many different colors, including albino (white with pink eyes), beige, black, brown, blue and gold, and in many different patterns, including Siamese, spotted and hooded. Albino rats have poor eyesight, and all rats rely on whiskers and scent for sensory input, sometimes weaving their head back and forth to focus on objects.

Zoological Education Network provides educational materials about exotic companion animals.

Most Common Disorders of Rats

Respiratory disease
(mycoplasmosis, secondary infections, viruses)

Congestive heart failure

Mammary tumors

Cancer

Ectoparasitism

Pituitary tumors

Abscesses

Obesity

Pododermatitis (foot infection)

Malocclusion

Sudden death/trauma

Nephrosis

Overheating/chilling/heat stress

Paraplegia in geriatric rats

The most common health problem in rats is respiratory disease. Visiting your veterinarian for routine health checks will help prevent many diseases and support you in having a fun, satisfying relationship with your pet rat. For help in finding a small mammal veterinarian in your area, contact the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians (AEMV) by visiting www.AEMV.org and click on "Find an Exotic Mammal Vet."

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RATS



Companion Mammal Care
S E R I E S

What to Expect from Your Rat

Rats make excellent pets, being clean, quiet and easy to care for. Strong bonds can quickly be formed with these intelligent, inquisitive and affectionate animals. Because rats are so social (free-ranging rats

live communally), it is best for at least two same-sex or altered rats to live together. Single rats must receive more attention than most pet owners are willing to give.

Rats are usually very gentle and reluctant to bite unless they are frightened. Most rats will allow you to pick them up by placing

your hand firmly over the back and rib cage, or by scooping them up with both hands.

Is Your Rat a Male or a Female?

Male rats have a large scrotum, making them easy to differentiate from female rats. Also, the distance from the anus to the genitals is roughly twice as long in male rats as in female rats. Only female rats have nipples.

Families interested in breeding their rats must first decide how to find homes for all the babies. Then, some preparatory reading is recommended. The average litter is 12 and the gestation period is 21-23 days. The babies should not be weaned until they are 4-5 weeks old.

Are Rats Tame?

Domestic rats are born tame, but they still need to be socialized to bond to humans. Baby rats need to be handled as much as possible beginning at birth and especially between 2-4 weeks of age. It is a myth that handling the babies will cause the mother to kill them.

What Do Rats Do All Night?

Rats are mostly nocturnal, so evening is the best time to observe and interact with them. Daily attention, handling and regularly scheduled play times at least 30 minutes in length will lead to a calmer, gentler pet.

Rats need a cage large enough to provide room for toys and exercise. Rats also need a place to hide and sleep, such as a box or a hammock. Toys are required for the rats' health and well-being.

Rats like to explore their surroundings and favor tubes, climbing toys, exercise wheels and areas to investigate. Safe items on which to gnaw, such as commercial chew sticks, pesticide-free hardwood branches and ink-free cardboard, are also necessary. Rats thrive best in full darkness at night; nightlights or uncovered windows in their environment should be avoided.

What Should You Feed Your Rat?

Rats are omnivorous, eating both plant and animal foods. Commercially available pelleted diets made specifically for rats (e.g., by Teklad, Mazuri, Wayne) are adequate to meet nutritional needs. Rat blocks (pellets) should be offered free-choice. The best treats are fresh fruits and vegetables. Adding nutritional supplements, such as HEALx Sunshine Factor,[®] may be beneficial. Poor nutrition can lead to weight loss, obesity or overall ill health.

Fresh water should be available at all times, ideally provided via a drinking bottle. The bottle and sipper tube should be cleaned each time the bottle is refilled, making sure the sipper tube functions properly.

Vital Statistics

Average adult body weight:

Female: 250-400 grams (9-14 oz)

Male: 450-520 grams (16-18 oz)

Age of sexual maturity: 5-7 weeks

Average life span: 2-3 years

What Your Veterinarian Looks for in a Healthy Rat



How to Keep Your Rat Healthy, Happy and Safe!

- ✓ Handle gently.
 - ✓ Provide daily playtime.
 - ✓ Maintain a clean environment to minimize stress and the risk of respiratory disease.
 - ✓ Avoid overcrowding.
 - ✓ Feed a fresh, high quality pelleted diet formulated specifically for rats/rodents.
 - ✓ Provide fresh water at all times.
 - ✓ Frequent lump checks and weight, teeth and respiratory health examinations are recommended in order to quickly observe and treat any impending health problem.
 - ✓ Check fecal pellets: they should be firm, oval, yet contain moisture. Constipation or dehydration may be indicated if stools are hard, dry and smaller than usual; illness may be present if feces are overly soft.
 - ✓ Monitor water bottle levels.
- Housing for a single pet rat should:
- ✓ be at least 14" x 24" x 12" (35 x 60 x 30 cm) — the bigger, the better
 - ✓ be made of safe, cleanable, escape-proof material
 - ✓ have solid flooring of plastic or metal, large enough to allow nesting, burrowing and exercise areas
 - ✓ contain ¼" (0.64 cm) bedding material, which should be changed about once a week
 - ✓ include suitable substrates, such as shredded paper (non-inked), recycled newspaper composite materials or pellets, hardwood chips or shavings and compressed wheat straw. Cedar chips should be avoided as they may be toxic
 - ✓ be maintained at room temperature (65-80°F [18-26°C]) with 40-70% humidity
 - ✓ include a hammock, hide box or sleeping box
 - ✓ be located off the floor and away from windows and heating/cooling vents
- It is important to prevent rats from accessing:
- ✗ dogs, cats and ferrets without proper introduction and supervision
 - ✗ small children without supervision
 - ✗ electrical cords or wires
 - ✗ trauma from falls
 - ✗ pesticides and other toxins
 - ✗ tobacco and cigarette smoke
 - ✗ cedar and pine shavings
 - ✗ ammonia from a dirty cage
 - ✗ elevated floors or ramps made of ½" x 1" (1.27 x 2.54 cm) wire mesh
 - ✗ items you do not want your rat to chew
 - ✗ toxic houseplants
 - ✗ other small pet mammals and birds (which a rat can kill)
 - ✗ temperatures over 90°F (32°C)
 - ✗ wire exercise wheels

*www.HEAL-x.com