Rat Care Guide

15-page illustrated guide | Social companions, housing, nutrition and health



Rats are intelligent, social animals. Plan for compatible same-sex companions, a spacious ventilated cage, daily enrichment and access to an exotics veterinarian.

A practical, species-specific guide for responsible ownership in the United States. Use it alongside an experienced small-mammal veterinarian and current local rules.

1 | Is a rat right for you?

Pet rats are curious, social and often enjoy interacting with familiar people. Their typical lifespan is about 1.5–3 years. They need daily attention, a clean roomy enclosure, supervised exercise, and prompt care when ill.

– Plan for a pair or small compatible same-sex group.

– Secure a vet who routinely treats rats before adoption.

– Keep them away from kitchens, smoke, aerosols, and predator animals.

2 | Choose healthy compatible rats

Adopt from a rescue or responsible breeder who can identify sex accurately and discuss temperament and history. Look for bright eyes, smooth coat, comfortable movement, clean breathing and normal droppings. Rats are social; introductions require neutral space and close observation.

– Ask for age, sex, diet, health history and any medications.

– Separate males and females unless a veterinarian has confirmed sterilization.

– Do not house rats with mice, hamsters, gerbils or other species.

3 | Cage, space and safe placement

Use a large, well-ventilated cage with solid resting platforms, secure latches and no sharp edges or wire floors. Provide multiple hides, hammocks, climbing routes, litter areas and separate food and water stations. Place the cage in a calm, temperature-stable room.

– Avoid aquariums with poor airflow and floors that trap urine ammonia.

– Choose bar spacing narrow enough to prevent escape, especially for young rats.

– Keep away from direct sun, drafts, fumes and loud speakers.

4 | Bedding, nesting and cleaning

Use dust-controlled paper bedding or other rat-safe substrate and unscented nesting paper. Avoid cedar and aromatic untreated wood shavings. Spot-clean wet areas daily, wash bowls and water bottles, and clean the enclosure regularly while retaining a little clean familiar nesting material.

– Check water-bottle flow every day.

– Use washable fabric only if loose threads cannot catch toes.

– A strong ammonia smell means cleaning and ventilation need attention.

5 | Everyday food and treats

Feed a complete, age-appropriate rat block or pellet as the staple and provide fresh water continuously. Small portions of safe vegetables and occasional fruit can enrich the diet. Keep treats modest and avoid sugary, salty, sticky or spoiled food. Rats do not need routine vitamin supplements on a complete diet unless prescribed.

– Change diets gradually over several days.

– Use scatter-feeding and simple foraging to encourage activity.

– Avoid sudden access to unfamiliar rich foods.

6 | Enrichment and exercise

Rats need daily supervised time outside the cage in a rat-proof play area and varied mental activities. Offer tunnels, cardboard boxes, shreddable paper, safe chew toys, climbing opportunities and short reward-based training sessions. Rotate some objects while leaving familiar resting places.

– Block gaps, wires, houseplants, medicines and recliner mechanisms.

– Never use exercise balls; they restrict ventilation and movement.

– Supervise all out-of-cage activity.

7 | Handling and bonding

Let a new rat settle, speak quietly, offer a treat from your hand, then support the body with both hands. Many enjoy shoulder or lap time when they can choose to approach and retreat. Never grab by the tail or lift high over a hard floor. Children should sit down and be supervised.

– Build trust through brief calm sessions each day.

– Wash hands after cage cleaning and before food preparation.

– Do not wake or chase a frightened rat.

8 | Grooming and hygiene

Most rats groom themselves. Keep the habitat dry and clean, and check feet, tail, coat, eyes, ears and teeth during gentle handling. Bathing is rarely necessary; ask a veterinarian about a specific soiling or skin problem. Trim nails only with guidance if you are unsure.

– Never use human shampoo, perfume, or flea products without a vet.

– Persistent red-brown eye/nose discharge, odor, or itching needs assessment.

– Offer chewable safe materials; do not trim incisors at home.

9 | Preventive veterinary care

Arrange an initial exam soon after adoption and ask an exotics veterinarian how often to return; an annual wellness check is a practical baseline for a healthy adult, with more frequent visits for seniors or chronic disease. No routine vaccinations are generally given to pet rats. Keep weight and symptom notes.

– Ask the clinic about urgent respiratory and mass evaluation.

– Bring the food label, cage photos, and a fresh stool sample if requested.

– Never give human pain relievers or leftover antibiotics.

10 | Warning signs and emergencies

Seek prompt veterinary advice for noisy or difficult breathing, reduced appetite, sudden weight loss, hunched posture, lethargy, head tilt, abnormal gait, persistent red-brown discharge, diarrhea, wounds, lumps or changes in droppings. Open-mouth breathing, collapse, seizures, severe bleeding or inability to eat are emergencies.

– Rats can hide illness; do not wait several days to see if it passes.

– Keep an ill rat warm, quiet and safely contained for transport.

– Call the clinic before arrival and describe breathing signs.

11 | Budget and lifetime costs

Planning estimates vary by region: budget roughly $150–$400+ for a suitable cage and setup, $25–$60 monthly for food, bedding and enrichment for a pair, and about $50–$150+ per routine veterinary exam. A pair may cost several hundred dollars each year, excluding illness, diagnostics or surgery; keep an emergency reserve.

– Ask local clinics for exam, imaging, and after-hours fees.

– Budget for two animals, not only one adoption fee.

– Compare insurance exclusions and consider a dedicated savings fund.

12 | Children and other pets

Rats can form strong bonds with calm people, but they are fragile and may carry germs. Adults must supervise handling and remain responsible for care. Cats, dogs, snakes and ferrets can injure or frighten them; keep secure barriers and separate play times. Never rely on a cage alone as protection from a predator.

– Teach handwashing and gentle two-hand support.

– Keep the cage out of a child’s unsupervised bedroom if care cannot be monitored.

– Never introduce rats directly to another pet.

13 | Travel and emergency planning

For short trips, rats are generally better cared for at home by a knowledgeable sitter. Leave daily feeding, water checks, cleaning and emergency instructions. Use a secure ventilated carrier with familiar bedding for veterinary trips. Avoid heat, cold drafts, direct sunlight and parked cars.

– Keep the clinic and after-hours number visible.

– Have a carrier ready before illness occurs.

– Do not transport loose in clothing or an open box.

14 | First month and daily checklist

Prepare the full habitat before adoption, keep the original diet at first, and allow quiet settling. Observe each rat's appetite, breathing, activity, weight trend and social behavior. Confirm that every animal can reach food, water and a safe resting place. Book a vet visit and keep notes.

– Daily: food, water, droppings, activity and breathing.

– Weekly: spot-check body condition, cage latches and enrichment.

– At least yearly: wellness exam, with earlier care whenever signs change.

Sources and further reading

This is an original educational guide, not a reproduction of the requested book. The supplied eBay item number is included for reference; listing title, author, and edition could not be independently confirmed. Consult an experienced veterinarian for individual care decisions.

– User-supplied eBay listing

– Merck Veterinary Manual: Providing a Home for a Rat

– Merck Veterinary Manual: Routine Health Care of Rats

– Merck Veterinary Manual: Disorders and Diseases of Rats

– Merck Veterinary Manual: Rats at a Glance

– Humane World for Animals: Is a Rat the Right Pet for You?