

# BEFORE YOU ADOPT A RAT...



**Why Rats:** Rats are highly intelligent and social creatures who make very loving and entertaining companions. They love attention from humans, quickly learn their names, and can be taught several tricks.

**Rats & Children:** With proper care, rats can live 2 to 3 years. Due to their social nature and intelligence, rats are the least likely of the small animals to bite, so they make good companions for

children. However, an adult should always supervise the care of a child's companion animal.

**Get at Least Two:** Rats are very social and need the companionship of other rats to stay happy and healthy. Always adopt the same sex, so you don't end up with babies. It's always best to adopt littermates when possible.

**Gender:** Although all rats have individual personalities, females tend to be smaller, more active, and playful, while males are often larger, more mellow, and snuggly.

**How to Sex a Rat:** Telling the difference between a male and a female rat is easy, as males have a very large scrotum and no nipples. If you see male rats housed with female rats, know that the females will most likely be pregnant.

**Handling:** Never pick a rat up by his tail. The tail isn't designed to support the rat's weight, and picking a rat up by his tail can seriously injure the rat. Always handle rats gently, and supervise children to do the same. Rats should get at least 1/2 hour of playtime outside their cages every day. The more time you spend with your rats, the friendlier they'll become.

**Cage:** Each rat should have at least 2 cubic feet of living space (e.g., a 24"x24"x24" cage holds 4 rats). If you choose an aquarium, it's vital that it be properly ventilated and cleaned often. If choosing a cage, make sure the bar spacing is no more than 1/2" apart and that openings are secured to prevent escape. Wire floors can cause sores on your rats' feet, so cover them with solid flooring. Keep cages in a quiet spot off the floor and away from drafts, heaters, direct sunlight, and other animals. 72° F is the ideal temperature for a rat.

**Accessories:** Rats should be provided with a sleeping den and lots of fun, safe toys. Avoid wire exercise wheels as these can break tails and damage little rat feet. You can find a rat-safe exercise wheel at [www.transoniq.com](http://www.transoniq.com).

**Litter and Bedding:** Choose litter made out of aspen or recycled paper. Cedar and pine are toxic to rats and can cause skin, liver, respiratory system, and kidney damage. Timothy hay makes a great nesting material.

**Food & Water:** Commercial seed mixes make a poor diet and should be avoided. Instead, choose rat blocks for about 80% of their main diet. Rat blocks look like giant pellets and can be found at almost any pet store. Provide these blocks freely to your rats. The other 20% of a rat's diet should consist of a daily serving of fresh fruits/vegetables. (Be sure to remove any uneaten portions of fruits/vegetables the following day, as rotten food can be toxic.) Fresh food plays an important role in your rats' balanced diet. Give extra treats sparingly, as obesity is a huge health risk to your rats. When possible, provide spring/filtered water over tap water. A water bottle provides a cleaner alternative to a water bowl. Make sure yours is in working order, and freshen it each day.

**Cleanliness:** Rats are very clean animals. Females, with proper care, do not smell. Males on the other hand tend to have an odor. Rats can be litter trained to do their "business" only in their cage. However, most rats do have a need to mark their environment—including you—with small droplets of urine. Fortunately, the urine is odorless and in such tiny amounts that it is easy to clean up.

Keep cages, food dishes, toys, and water bottles very clean to prevent illness in your rats. Avoid detergents and toxic cleaners, as the fumes and residue can kill your rats. Vinegar and then 3% hydrogen peroxide (must be sprayed on separately) make a highly effective, non-toxic disinfectant.

**Safety:** The area you choose for your rats' playtime should be "rat proofed" to protect your rats and your belongings. Remove all electrical cords, toxic plants, falling hazards, and possible escape routes—rats can squeeze into tiny spaces, so use extra caution. Be sure to keep all other animals away from your rats! Dogs, cats, and ferrets can kill your rats, and your rats may attack any animal smaller than themselves. Never step on, sit on, or shut a door on your rat.

**Illnesses:** Illness can progress rapidly in rats. Find a rat-savvy vet **before** your companion needs care, and immediately take your rat there if you suspect your rat is sick. Signs of illness can include excessive red material around the eyes and nose (rat tears are red), wheezing, sneezing, coughing (which looks like hiccups), lethargy, head tilt, and lack of appetite. Learning what's "normal" for your rats' behavior can help you to notice changes in your rats' health more easily.

Rat illnesses transfer easily through the air and by touch. To avoid spreading illness, always isolate new rats away from your other rats for at least three weeks before introducing them. Avoid handling your own rats after handling rats who are not a part of your family, unless you've washed everything that's come into contact with the other rats first. Wash rat scratches with soap and water to lessen potential allergic reactions.



**Helpful Websites:**

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/midwestmischief/>  
[www.rattyrat.com](http://www.rattyrat.com)  
[www.rmca.org](http://www.rmca.org)  
[www.ratguide.com](http://www.ratguide.com)  
[www.ratfanclub.org](http://www.ratfanclub.org)

**Helpful Books:**

*The Rat Health Care Booklet*, by Debbie Ducommun (find it at [www.ratfanclub.org/books.html](http://www.ratfanclub.org/books.html))

*Rats: Practical, Accurate Advice from the Expert*, by Debbie Ducommun (find it at your local bookstore)