



RAT CARE OVERVIEW

Rats are one of the best small pets for young and old alike! Healthy, well-socialized rats are gentle and love to interact with their owner(s). When one thinks of rats, however, they often think of wild barn or city rats. Mainely Rat Rescue (MRR) is dedicated to the well being of domestic rats, which have been bred as pets for over a century.

Many of MRR's rats come from less than ideal situations (accidental litters, snake food breeders, hoarders, etc.). In addition, rats have a short life span which typically ranges between 2-3 years. For the brief time they are with us, we want them to be as healthy and happy as possible and to have only the very best homes.

The founders of Mainely Rat Rescue come from various backgrounds and all have vast experience based on years of having their own pet rats, working in shelters, and/or working in veterinary hospitals. Their combined knowledge sets the standard for the rat care we now expect our foster families and adoptive homes to provide. Here are some guidelines on the proper care of pet rats.

Social Needs

A. Rats and Rats

Rats are very social animals and should never be kept alone. Even if you are able to spend 24 hours daily with your rat, it is NOT a substitute for rat company. Rats groom each other, play, and snuggle together. Even with rat friends, your rats will still love and need you. A solitary rat can develop neurotic and aggressive behavior and suffer from depression. We provide tips on introducing even the most challenging rats (please refer to the **MRR Introductions** document). It is only acceptable to keep a solitary rat in the rare circumstance where a rat is unable to get along with other rats despite all attempts.

Please consider keeping at least three rats at any given time. Rats can become extremely depressed at the loss of a cagemate, especially when left suddenly alone. You do not want to be left scrambling to find a suitable cagemate for your lonely mourning rat after a cagemate has passed.

Please do NOT separate a rat from its cagemates when it is sick. Rats need their family and their cuddle buddies to help them recover. There is nothing that a sick rat can pass on to its cagemates to which they would not already have been exposed.

B. Rats and People

Rats enjoy daily interaction and playtime with their families, both rat and human. An hour a day is recommended, if possible. You can rat-proof a room for playtime or let your rats play on a bed or couch. Most rats are afraid of heights and will not jump. You can even put a rat on your shoulder or in the hood of a sweatshirt worn in reverse while you are busy doing something else. You can sit with rats on your lap while you read, watch television or work on the computer. Rats thrive on time spent out with you and their friends.

Young children should be supervised around rats, as rats are small animals and can be easily lost or injured if mishandled. Even if you are adopting the rats for your child, remember they should be considered family pets and your child should not be made solely responsible for the care and handling of the rats.

Living Environment

A. Location

Since rats are very social, they should be kept in a part of the house where the family spends most of its time. Rats are most active early in the morning and again later on in the evening so the living or family room is the ideal place for rats. They like to be where there is a lot of traffic and action. If they are to be housed in a bedroom, this is acceptable provided there is someone in the room a good part of the evening. Putting a cage in a young child's bedroom is NOT recommended, however, as the noise rats make during the night may interfere with the child's sleep.

B. Housing

Rats need a cage roomy enough for all of their exercise needs and accessories: toys, igloos, litter boxes, food dishes, and hammocks to name a few. Besides their accessories they also need room to run around and play with each other. Multi-level cages designed specifically for rats are the best choice for them. Aquariums are not appropriate housing as they are typically small, not well ventilated and hard to clean.

Rats need 2.0 – 2.5 cubic feet of space per rat. Enter the dimensions of your cage into a cage calculator to determine whether the cage you have is the right size for the number of rats you plan to house (see the end of this document for links to cage calculators).

If you need to purchase a cage, please review our list of [Cage Recommendations](#). Younger rats (and many adult females) need cages with ½ inch bar spacing as they can escape from anything wider so keep that in mind when purchasing a cage. Before you purchase a cage not included on this list, please check with your adoption counselor.

Diet and Nutrition

It is very important to feed your rats a healthy diet. Sadly, many rat food brands sold in pet stores contain ingredients that are either indigestible to rats or are harmful to their health. Rats will eat selected ingredients in these food mixes happily because they are the rat equivalent of “junk food”. Therefore, most rat chow or seed mixes sold in pet stores should be avoided.

Our ultimate goal is to help you choose the healthiest and most economical rat foods possible. With some attention to healthy choices, preparing your rats’ meals can be an easy process that is fun for both you and your rats. MRR recommends feeding rats a high quality lab block (such as Native Earth, available via the online MRR Rat Roost), supplemented by a homemade grain mix, fruits and vegetables.

For additional information, please refer to the MRR document, [**Rat Diet and Nutrition**](#).

NOTE: Please freeze all food and bedding for 24-48 hours in order to kill any parasites that may have entered the packing during warehouse storage.

Bedding and Litter

Your rats' bedding and litter are very important and play a key part in their well-being.

Pine and cedar litter should never be used with small animals, as they are toxic. The long-term effects can be liver disease, a depressed immune system and respiratory illnesses. If you wish to use wood shavings, aspen shavings are a good, safe choice.

Corn cob litter is also not recommended as sometimes rats will eat it and choke.

Carefresh and Eco-Bedding are paper-based beddings and are good alternatives to wood shavings. They are economical and rats love to fluff, build nests and burrow in it. However, Carefresh is not recommended for hairless rats (please see our [**Hairless Rat Care**](#) document).

Recycled paper pellets and rabbit food pellets can also be used as litter (the rats do not eat the rabbit pellets). Hardwood pellets (not softwood) can also be used but be sure accelerants have not been added.

Avoid clay cat litters as they are very dusty and the dust can clump in the moisture of the lungs. Do not use scented or self-scooping litters; these contain chemicals to control odors and create the clumping and may be harmful to rats.

MRR recommends using fleece to line the shelves and bottom of the cage. Rats love to snuggle up in fleece! It is safe and flexible (no small strings in which ratty feet may get caught). The flexible fabric minimizes the chance rats will hurt themselves by getting their head stuck in the holes which they will inevitably chew.

CAUTION: Rats have died when they have chewed holes in inflexible fabric and gotten stuck so we do not recommend using old clothing, towels, etc.

Some people use a combination of products, perhaps fleece on upper shelves, fleece or a paper or wood-based litter on the bottom of the cage and a different substrate in the litter box.

Please refer to our **Bedding and Litter** document for tips on litter box training.

NOTE: Please freeze all food and bedding for 24-48 hours in order to kill any parasites that may have entered the packing during warehouse storage.

Health Issues

A. The Right Vet for You and Your Rats

Rats can develop a variety of health issues such as respiratory and heart disease, tumors, skin and eye issues, etc. Some types of rats, such as hairless rats, are more prone to skin and eye issues while senior rats may also require special care (see MRR documents **Hairless Rat Care** and **Senior Rat Care**). Developing a relationship with a rat-savvy vet is extremely important and should be done before your rat needs vet care. Please consult our **Vet Recommendations** list for a rat-savvy vet in your area or if you are personally aware of a vet we should add, please let us know.

B. Neutering and Spaying

There are many benefits to neutering or spaying your rats.

Males: Intact males sometimes develop hormonal aggression as they grow into adulthood. This can manifest itself in aggressive behavior towards other rats and occasionally towards their people. Adult intact male rats are the hardest to introduce to other rats should you ever decide to add to your rat family. They also tend to “mark” their territory. Neutered male rats are less territorial and do not have the buck grease or the odor associated with intact males. People with allergies to rat urine or dander are more likely to tolerate neutered males. We recommend neutered males to all of our families with very young children, as they are generally the gentlest and easiest to handle rats.

Please note: We neuter many male rats by the time they are 4 months old to prevent any of the above issues. If you choose to adopt intact males, please call your vet to see how much it would cost to have them neutered should you need to have it done in the future.

Females: The benefits of spaying are primarily health related. Spayed females are less prone to developing malignant cancers. The earlier they are spayed the better in terms of maximizing the health benefit. If you choose to neuter or spay your rats before adoption, we ask for a donation of \$80.00 per rat to cover our vet expenses. The adoption fee will be waived. Please feel free to call your own vet to see what they would charge.

C. Quarantine or “Introducing New Rats to your Mischief”

Rats can carry and transmit illnesses to other rats, especially respiratory disease. There are two main ways we may inadvertently expose our rats to disease: by shopping in pet stores that carry live rodents or by introducing new, non-quarantined rats to our home.

Dangerous viruses such as Sendai and SDA may be present in pet stores or shelters that carry live rodents. These viruses are airborne and can live off the rat for up to 3 hours. You do not need to touch a rat or even see a rat to carry these viruses home to your own pets. When visiting pet stores or shelters where live rodents are housed, a 3 hour waiting period is advised before returning home to your rats. Whenever possible, please buy supplies online or at a store that does not carry rodents. If you must enter a pet store, plan your errands such that the store is first on your list, followed by your other errands, and plan to be out of your home for 3 hours after leaving the store.

Any time you introduce new rats to your household, you may also introduce a disease. This risk is greatly minimized when adopting from our rescue as our foster families are trained to follow proper quarantine protocol, ensuring that the rats in our foster homes are quarantined prior to being released for adoption. If you do bring home a rat from another source, it is recommended you keep the new rat in a separate air space from your current group for 3 weeks. A true 'separate airspace' entails the new rat being in a completely different air space from that of your home, in other words, in another home completely. It is not sufficient to simply have the new rat 'down the hall' or in another room with the door closed. That is not separate air space since the air within a home circulates throughout the home. Ideally, a friend who does not have their own rats would provide the quarantine in their home for the 3 week time period.

If you have no other option than to bring the newcomer to your own home, keep as great a distance as possible between the newcomer and your resident crew, wash your hands when going in between groups and always handle the newcomer(s) last, after your current group.

D. Humane Euthanasia

One of the most difficult, yet important, issues to discuss with your vet in advance is humane euthanasia. Please contact us if you would like more information on humane euthanasia.

E. Smoking and Rats

Rats, just like people, can get sick from secondhand cigarette smoke. Smoking of tobacco and secondhand smoke are known to cause cancer in both humans and rats. In addition, rats as a species already have delicate immune systems that do not do well with extra stressors or odors of any kind. This means that not only tobacco smoke, but smokes of any kind, as well as things like incense or strong perfumes, should not be used around your rats in order to best preserve their respiratory health and allow them to live long and healthy lives.

While we would not require anyone to quit smoking in order to adopt rats, we strongly recommend smoking outside and washing hands between smoking and handling your rats. Failure to do so can lead to side effects such as cancer or worse and more frequent upper respiratory infections. We ask that you keep these precautions in mind when looking to adopt a pet with such a delicate respiratory system.

Accessories

Rats love and need accessories in their cage. We recommend at least one hiding place such as a plastic igloo or wooden hut. You can make your own hiding places out of small boxes with holes for entrance and exit routes. Rats also love lounging in hammocks. You can make your own or buy them from The Rat Roost, our online store.

Please do not use edible logs or huts, such as the Snak Shak, as these contain pine and alfalfa which are unhealthy for your rats.

In addition, large running balls are NOT recommended for rats. They often scare rats and can trap rats in their own feces and urine. They can also cause back injuries. If you have a ball, we suggest taking the cover off and using zip ties to attach it to your cage as a hangout for your rats.

Some rats love their wheels, while others are indifferent to it. Females are known to like wheels the most, though we have known quite a few males who have developed “wheelie tails” as a result of their addiction to the wheel.

The MRR Rat Roost online store sells a variety of rat-friendly accessories such as wheels, dishes, hammocks, snacks, toys and more. Click on the “MRR Stores” link on our homepage.

Additional Resources

A. MRR Resources

Our website, www.mainelyratrescue.org provides a variety of links and resources, including links to our online food and accessory stores plus forums.

MRR Store – The MRR Store offers hammocks in a variety of original designs, as well as Native Earth lab blocks, food bowls, toys and other cage accessories such as Wodent and Stealth Wheels. We also sell t-shirts and goodies for yourself or a friend and don't miss our annual rat calendar! Click on the “MRR Stores” link on our homepage.

MRR Documents - MRR offers detailed educational documents on these topics:

- Cage Recommendations
- Rat Diet and Nutrition
- Bedding and Litter
- List of Recommended Vets
- New Rat Parent Checklist
- MRR Introductions
- Hairless Rat Care
- And more....

B. Other Resources

Here are additional websites where you can learn more about caring for your pet rats.

Cage Info

<http://www.rattycorner.com/odds/calc.shtml> - cage calculator

www.martinscages.com - Please ask for our recommendations before you order a cage as even these wonderful cages have pros and cons.

<http://www.midwesthomes4pets.com> - Midwest Homes manufactures the Critter Nation cage designed especially for pet rats. Many websites sell Critter Nation cages at competitive prices. Look around to see what specials are available.

https://www.bassequipment.com/Store/SCResult/245/Critter_Nation_Replacement_Pans - bass pans

Food/Diet

<http://ratsrule.com/diet.html> - the "recipe" for the Suebee's homemade grain mix

<http://www.ratfanclub.org/diet.html> - "The Rat Lady" Debbie Ducommun's website

Health Care

www.ratguide.com - online medical resource

<http://www.ratfanclub.org/books.html> - Debbie Ducommun's Rat Health Care Booklet

General Discussion / Forums

www.ratbehavior.org - very informative website

www.goosemoose.com - fun, informative forum.

If you have any questions or want any additional information, please contact your adoption counselor.