



## RAT BEHAVIOR GUIDE

If you are new to rats, some aspects of rat behavior may be a mystery to you! Based on some common questions from new adopters, we've put together this document to help you figure out what is normal, what is a warning sign, and what may warrant a trip to the vet.

### A. GOOD SIGNS

These behaviors are good things to see in your rat--things that may indicate your rat likes you and is having a good time.

#### 1. Bruxing and Boggling

You are hanging out with your rat, giving him some good scratches, when all of a sudden it looks like his eyes are falling out of his head?! Should you get him to a vet immediately, oh no, he was fine just a second ago, and now he's dying!?! Nope--he is most likely just very happy!



*The face of a happy rat!*

When a rat is relaxed, he may grind his teeth together, a behavior called **bruxing**. When bruxing goes into overdrive, the contractions of the jaw muscle may cause the eyeballs to vibrate as well (**boggling**). Most of the time, this behavior means your rat is having a grand old time! It may occur during scratches or when he is just relaxing in a pile with some friends. You may never see it happen, and that's okay--some rats just don't boggle. This behavior can also be associated with stress, so if your rat boggles after surgery or when he's sick, it may be because of some pain or anxiety rather than happiness.

#### 2. Nibbling

Rats have teeth that just keep on growing, so they love to use them even on their friends. When you first start bonding with your rat, don't be surprised if she uses her teeth in a few ways. A rat may explore you with her teeth--doing what we call a **test nibble** to see "Hey, is this food?". If the answer is no and there is no aggression behind the action, she'll stop biting and move on. Do your best to stay relaxed, as pulling away can just make a rat want to try harder, resulting in broken skin when that was not the rat's intention at all!

Rats also may **groom** you with their teeth the same way they might groom a rat-friend. Grooming will feel like many little nibbles, nothing nearly hard enough to break the skin, and they will concentrate in one area. Common areas to groom include fingernails, cuticles, the skin between thumb and forefinger, and possibly even beards, arm hair, and head hair. Some rats are also interested in grooming up noses and in mouths, but you don't have to let them! If your rat is getting too aggressive with her grooming, you can give a "squeak" or "eep" sound that lets her know "ouch!" and she should stop or move to a different spot.

### 3. Going in for the “kill”

The final friendly use of rattie teeth is to “kill” you during **wrestling**. Some rats love to play-wrestle with humans, and may get into it by going for the kill with their teeth. They know they are playing, so these are usually excessively gentle little bites--they want you to play along and have fun, too, so they aren’t going to bite hard enough to deter you! If you do get a rat biting too hard when playing, though, see above about “eep”ing again.

## **B. NEUTRAL SIGNS**

Some behaviors are neither good nor bad, or may depend on the situation.

### 1. Peeing on me

Rats can be trained to poop in a litter box, but few rats can be trained to pee where you’d like. Boys and girls alike will dribble out a little urine here and there in a behavior known as **scent marking**. When this is done on your furniture, you may be a little frustrated, so it’s a good idea to put down an old towel or sheet before rattie play time. When this is done on you, it means “you’re mine” and is generally a sign of at least passive affection.

If your rat pees on you as soon as you pick him up, or pees a whole bladder rather than a few drops, this can mean:

- 1) “I have been out of the cage too long and I’ve been holding it because I’m trying to be a good boy. I think I’d like to have gone back a minute ago, but now please put me back anyway so you can change your pants.”
- 2) “I am scared!”

You should be able to figure out which this means in context, but in either case it’s a good sign that it’s back to the cage and time to try again in a few minutes while you clean up.

### 2. Rat-on-rat fighting

All rats will fight with cage mates. Rats have a very hierarchical society and like to know who’s on top and where they stand in the social lineup. Especially if new rats have been added or old rats have passed away, things may get a little tense. The general rule is “no blood, no foul”, so if no one is bleeding everything is a-ok!

When in doubt, this site ([http://www.ratbehavior.org/norway\\_rat\\_vocalizations.htm](http://www.ratbehavior.org/norway_rat_vocalizations.htm)) has a few sample vocalizations to let you know what is a normal play-fight squeak and what means rattie murder.

### 3. Tail Wagging

This behavior varies greatly by rat and by context. Most rats will never wag their tails. If you do see it, it can mean one of three things:

- 1) Play! Some rats, similar to dogs, may wag their tails when they get very excited and want to play.
- 2) Aggression. Some rats may wag their tail during territorial standoffs, letting another rat know it's time to back off.
- 3) Neutral. I've seen rats wag their tail for absolutely no discernible reason. Unless paired with another aggressive behavior, ultimately there's no cause for alarm.

### 4. My rat is leaking red stuff?

That's called **porphyrin**! Rats' eye and nose secretions are naturally a pinkish red, so don't worry--she's not bleeding out! A little of this around the eyes or nose is normal, as long as the rat cleans it right off and it doesn't come back immediately. Especially in the first few days of owning a rat, the change in environment might make her eyes and nose a little more watery than usual. If it doesn't go away, or if the amount is more than usual, or especially if your rat's lungs also don't sound clear, it can be a sign that it's time to go to the vet.

### 5. Head Swaying

This behavior looks quite aggressive, but actually is not. Rats in general have poor vision, so **swaying** or **bobbing** of the head simply helps with depth perception! This is most often seen in PEW (pink-eyed-white, or albino) rats, but any colorful rats can do it too when they're just trying to get a better view of what is ahead of them. To get a better look at your rat's perspective of the world, check out the images here: <http://www.ratbehavior.org/RatVision.htm#GeneralConclusion>

### 6. Ear Wiggles

You're playing with your female rat, trying to hand wrestle, and suddenly she stops in place, arches her back, and furiously wiggles her ears at you! Is this a sign she wants to play more? Did you somehow injure her? This is actually a sign that she is in heat and she's letting you know how cute she is. There's no cause for concern unless the one causing the wiggling is an intact male (side note: **never** let intact rats of the opposite sex play together, even for a moment. Mating can happen in seconds and now you have a litter on your hands!).

## C. WARNING SIGNS

Some rat behaviors may indicate impending aggression. Take heed of these and listen when your rat tells you he's had enough!

### 1. Pooping on me

A casual poop after being out of the cage for a while is just that--a casual poop. However, if your rat comes out of the cage frozen, lies there frozen, and poops a nice, wet poop where he sits, this means he is terrified! The poop of itself is not aggressive, but this is a warning that he is prepared to fight or flee. In one case, you have a rat hunt that could last hours as he darts from hiding spot to hiding spot, and in the other case you have a fun new scar to show off. Unless you are confident in working with scared rats, it may be a good time to put him back and try again more slowly another day.

### 2. Squeaking

Similar to the “eep”ing advice given above (see “nibbling”), a rat can eep right back at you! If you’re petting your rat and she squeaks, it means “okay, enough!”. Maybe you’ve hit a sensitive spot or maybe she’s just bored with you, but it’s best to move on to something else. Squeaking can be heard rat-to-rat as well when they fight and usually does not require your intervention. Do pay attention when you’re putting everyone back in the cage for the evening, though--a squeak heard then may indicate that you’re trying to close the door on someone’s toes or tail!

### 3. A long, slow bite

Before you get to a bite that breaks the skin, your rat may give you a long, slow bite while gazing into your eyes. This means he is seriously ticked off and is saying “no, for real this time, I need you to leave me alone”. Needless to say, it’s best to comply!

If your rat delves into truly aggressive behavior, please ask to see our socialization document for tips on how to better understand your rat and help you both work through it!

## **D. TAKE ME TO THE VET!**

Some behaviors just warrant immediate vet trips! Along with the very obvious, such as “my rat is bleeding out right now”, there are plenty of subtler signs. Rats are very good at hiding illness so pay attention to the little things! Signs it may be time to go to the vet include:

- If the lungs make noise while the rat is breathing (this is an **immediate** vet trip. Not necessarily an emergency trip, but tomorrow would be nice).
- Lethargy
- Diarrhea
- Lack of appetite or inability to properly hold food
- Constipation
- Seizures (video of a mild seizure: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JdWfrp64D4>)
- Head tilt and/or walking in circles

## **E. MISC TIPS**

To avoid aggressive behaviors with your rats, the easiest thing is to listen to them and consider their perspective!

1. Use the “squeak” or “eep” method to say “no”
2. Scoop from below, never grab from above
3. Especially when first getting to know your rats, avoid loud sounds and sudden movements
4. Wash your hands if you’ve been handling something tasty. Particularly strong smells may override a rat’s instinct to test bite before taking a chunk out of your finger, and you may end up with, well, a chunk out of your finger.
5. NEVER hold or grab a rat by the tail
6. NEVER try to assert dominance over your rat by forcing him onto his back, pinning him, yelling at him, or goodness forbid peeing on him

## **F. RESOURCES**

<http://www.ratbehavior.org/WhatIsMyRatDoingFAQ.htm> A great FAQ for all behaviors rat.

<http://www.isamurats.co.uk/rats-fighting-aggression-and-dominant-behaviour.html> A guide on distinguishing playful fighting from aggressive behaviors.

Please also see our socialization document if you are concerned about more aggressive behaviors!