



INTRODUCTIONS

Introducing new rats can be a stressful experience. No two introductions are the same: some rats will take immediately to new friends with little or no resistance, others may take days (sometimes weeks) of getting used to each other before they can cohabit, while other groupings of ratties can never comfortably cohabit. There are some strategies that can help the process go more smoothly.

Before we begin, it is important to learn The Golden Rule of Rat Introductions:

STAY COOL AS A CUCUMBER!

Rats can sense human anxiety so if we are uptight, they may figure something must be wrong and become uptight as well. You want to remain watchful but calm.

A. Basic Introductions Method

1. Proceed SLOWLY!

While some rats may get along immediately, do not assume this will be the case. It is better to take too much time with introductions than rushing and ending up with an injured rat. Especially if you are not experienced with introductions, it's better to err on the side of caution. Some rats may need one day of playdates, while others may need several over multiple days.

2. Choose Compatible Friends

Maximize your chances of a successful introduction by combining rats that are most compatible. For example, intact males will accept spayed females more easily than other intact males, especially when adult. This also applies to their ages: introduce young, but not too young. It is always easier to introduce babies to babies than adults to adults. A territorial adult male could be inclined to eliminate his competition, however, so you should not introduce any babies under six weeks old to an adult male.

3. Choose the Right Time of Day

Rats are biologically crepuscular. This means that the average rat is inclined toward being most active at night and in the early morning twilight hours and therefore is sleepest in the late morning through the middle of the day. Sleepy time is the best time to introduce rats, as they will all be a little out of it and less likely to cause a commotion. The earlier in the day the better. They will then have their 'siesta' together.

4. Introduce in Neutral Territory

The first few face-to-face introductions should happen in an area that no rat can claim as their own space. This can be a table top, a room no rat has had access to before, or the ever-favorite bath tub. Place a couple of upside down boxes for hiding spots that can be easily lifted for observation but nothing so small such that a rat gets 'cornered' and feels trapped within. This usually leads to the rat trying to protect its 'territory'. Throw some Cheerios or frozen veggies around and have a party.

5. Watch for Signs of Stress

You may want to briefly separate (with your hand, a piece of cardboard, or another familiar object) two rats who appear poofy or bristled, or when one is continuously pestering the other. A quick visual or physical break can help them learn to feel safe around each other. Scuffling once they've moved in together is normal, but you want them to start with a basis of trust. End each playdate before anyone is stressed, which may only be after 5-10 minutes, especially for the first meeting.

6. Clean the Cage Before Cohabitation

Before you let new rats hang out in a cage together, it is best to clean it thoroughly to reduce the chance of rats becoming territorial over old smells. Better yet, if feasible, buy that new cage you've been thinking about buying and let them move into a brand new, smell-free home together. You should also rearrange the cage setup or move the cage to a new room to make it feel less familiar to all rats.

B. Slower "Courtship" Method

A longer introduction is often the best way to introduce new rats, especially those having trouble accepting a new friend. Here is the most tried and true scenario to help your new rats get along:

1. Spend the first few days with the cages next to each other, within sniffing distance but far enough apart such that they cannot reach each other. Every 12-24 hours, swap the rats between cages.
2. Spend at least 3 days taking the rats into neutral territory for supervised visits.
3. You can also spend some time carrying the rats around in a bonding pouch or a hooded sweatshirt worn in reverse such that the hood is in the front of your body.
4. When this seems to be going well, let them run around a rat room or neutral space with plenty of room to get away from each other if need be.
5. Once they are continuously getting along at this stage, thoroughly clean the cage and attempt to house everyone together. If it doesn't go well, you can go back a few steps and give them a little longer to get used to each other first.

C. Helpful Links

<http://www.ratfanclub.org/newrat.html>

More on introductions, especially with at least one adult rat.

http://ratguide.com/care/behavior/introducing_rats.php

Further tips on those difficult introductions (aggressive or scared rats, a breeding pair, etc).

If you are still struggling with introductions, you may want to consult with MRR Rat Behaviorist Sandy (consultation for free; courses offered for a fee): mrr.sandym@gmail.com

GOOD LUCK!!