



Introduction to Rat Care

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Rats are intelligent, social, and often very affectionate pets. When properly socialized, they rarely bite. Because rats are social and need companionship, they should be maintained in same sex or altered sex groups. A healthy rat's life expectancy is two to three years.

This handout focuses on day-to-day care and preventive health, consistent with AAHA-style principles: safe housing, good nutrition, and early detection of illness.



Housing

Rats are agile and can escape many enclosures. Choose a secure cage made for rats or larger rodents. Multi-level cages are ideal because rats love to climb and explore. The Midwest Critter Nation cage is an excellent option.

An enclosure with solid flooring is preferred because it is easier to clean than wire or mesh. Wire floors are not recommended because pressure sores can form on the feet. These sores can lead to pododermatitis, an infected ulcerative condition commonly called bumblefoot. Your cage must be large enough for a rat-sized exercise wheel and have space for running, climbing, and enrichment. Make sure the top and doors are secure, as rats are escape artists.

Bedding and cleaning

Use a dust-controlled paper bedding such as Carefresh. Bedding should be changed at least twice weekly. Never use cedar or pine shavings. The aromatic phenols in these beddings can be highly irritating to a rat's respiratory system. Other acceptable bedding options include fleece liners, recycled newspaper, and aspen bedding. Provide nesting materials such as plain, unscented, dye-free tissue paper and cardboard rolls.

Clean the enclosure regularly to reduce odor and respiratory irritation. For routine cleaning, wash the cage with mild soap and water and rinse thoroughly before returning your rat to the cage.

Temperature and ventilation

Keep the environment at 65 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit, ideally around 72 degrees, with humidity between 40 and 70 percent. Good ventilation and clean housing are essential to reduce the risk of respiratory disease.

Enrichment

Rats need a variety of toys and activities to prevent boredom. Rotate toys every few days. Great options include tunnels, hammocks, hanging toys, cardboard rolls, wood chews, and safe home-made enrichment.

Diet

Feed a rat-specific pelleted diet. We recommend [Oxbow Animal Health Essentials Rat Food](#). Avoid seed and nut mixes. Rats will pick out favorite high-fat items and leave the balanced nutrition behind. Offering a variety of vegetable matter daily is great for fiber and nutrients. One tablespoon of chopped veggies per rat is recommended. Vegetables include raw or cooked carrots, green beans, squash, lettuces, peppers, and cucumbers.

Use a heavy ceramic bowl to reduce tipping and spilling. Fresh water should be available at all times in a water bottle or heavy bowl. Clean bowls and bottles regularly.

Rats should always have access to wood chews. Because their teeth grow continuously, rats can develop malocclusion if they do not have appropriate items to gnaw.

Monitoring weight is one of the simplest and most effective ways to detect illness early. We recommend purchasing a gram scale and weighing your rat at least once weekly. In rodents, weight loss is often the earliest sign of disease.

Spay and Neuter

Male rats

Neutering is recommended even if males are not housed with females. It can reduce aggression and urine-marking behaviors after puberty and helps prevent testicular tumors, which are common in intact older males. Neutering is often performed before puberty. Neutering can be performed when they reach 180 grams and both testicles have descended.

Female rats

Spaying is strongly recommended. Ideally, spay female rats at about three to four months of age or when body weight reaches approximately 180 grams. Spaying eliminates the risk of ovarian disease and greatly reduces the risk of other reproductive diseases. It also significantly reduces the likelihood of mammary tumors as the rat ages and is one of the most important steps to extend her healthy lifespan.

Common Medical Problems

Respiratory disease

Respiratory infections are among the most common problems in rats and may be caused by bacteria or viruses. Signs can include sneezing, increased breathing noise, nasal discharge, faster breathing rate, labored breathing, and red staining around the eyes or nose.

The red staining is not blood. It is a stress pigment called porphyrin.

Some respiratory infections resolve completely with antibiotics. Others become chronic, with periodic flare-ups requiring repeated treatment. Because some infections can be contagious, if you have a rat with chronic respiratory disease, it is best not to introduce new rats into the household.

Pododermatitis

Pododermatitis, also called bumblefoot, is often related to inappropriate flooring, obesity, or chronic exposure to moisture and dirty bedding. Signs include swelling, redness, and sores on the feet. This condition can be difficult to treat and needs prompt veterinary care.

Tumors

Mammary tumors are very common in female rats. Because rats have multiple mammary chains, tumors may appear anywhere along the chest or abdomen and may be single or multiple.

Tumors often begin as small lumps and can grow rapidly. Many are benign, meaning they do not spread, but some can be malignant. Surgery is typically easier and safer when tumors are small, so early evaluation matters.

Mites and Lice

Mites and lice are common and can cause itching, flaky skin, hair loss, redness, and irritation. Severity can range from mild to intense, and secondary skin infections may develop. Veterinary treatment is recommended if your rat shows signs of mites or lice.

Dental disease

A rat's front teeth grow continuously. If teeth do not align normally, they can overgrow. Signs include difficulty eating, dropping food, weight loss, and sometimes facial discomfort. Some rats require periodic veterinary trimming.

Signs of Illness

Contact us if you notice:

- Lumps or bumps
- Sneezing, runny nose, or runny eyes
- Hair loss, flaky skin, or itchiness
- Diarrhea
- Difficulty breathing
- Decreased appetite or weight loss
- Lethargy or a major change in behavior

Preventive Care

We recommend yearly exams and fecal tests for pet rats. Many rat illnesses progress quickly and early signs can be subtle. Routine exams help identify problems before they become advanced, which is a core goal of preventive care.

Between visits, your job is to know what is normal for your rat. Watch appetite, activity, breathing effort, stool quality, and body weight. If you notice changes, call. Early care often makes treatment simpler, less expensive, and more successful.

