(Rattus norvegicus)

Diet: Omnivorous

Adult Size: 13-18” including tail

Lifespan: 2-3 years

Native To: Worldwide

Characteristics: Intelligent, lively, sociable, entertaining

**Did you know:**

Rats have very poor distance vision and depth perception, but they can see colours in the ultraviolet spectrum that are invisible to the human eye.

A rat will reach puberty by the time it is only two months old, or younger. Females will go into heat about once a week. This period generally lasts one day. A female rat can have a litter of up to 11 babies every 4-5 weeks.

Recent research suggests that rats can smell in “stereo” with each nostril working independently of the other, much the same way human ears do. This excellent sense of smell helps the rat locate food.

**Look Out For This:** Rats are smart, inquisitive, strong and resourceful. They also have flexible bodies, and can, with a little determination, work their way their way through any opening that they can fit their head into. For all of these reasons, a rat’s enclosure should have secure doors and narrowly spaced bars. Extra care should also be taken to make a rat’s “playroom” outside the cage as escape proof as possible.

The material below is a general guideline, and is not intended to serve as your sole sources of pet care information. Visit a veterinarian and consult a broad range of literature to ensure that your pet receives adequate care.
**Things You should know about Rats:**

**The Basics:**
Intelligent, curious animals, rats are easily tamed and make good pets if provided with proper care and companionship. They enjoy the company of humans, and can often be taught simple tricks. Although they are not “high maintenance” pets, rats require regular attention from their human companions, and at least an hour of exercise outside their cages every day. Rats of both sexes make equally good pets, though females are often more playful than males. Unlike mice, there is no difference in odour between males and females. Though these hardy creatures can thrive in just about every climate extreme, they do have some basic needs to keep them healthy and happy. Since they are sociable animals, rats should be kept at least in pairs, or more if space allows. Adult females enjoy the companionship of other females, and males will usually live together happily if introduced at a young age. Neutered or spayed animals will get along well with others of either sex.

**Enclosure: Ventilation Is Critical:**
A wire cage measuring at least 2’ x 2’ x 2’ will give a pair of rats enough room to roam and climb. At least two cubic feet of space should be added for every additional rat. Since rats are intelligent and natural-born explorers, more space is always preferable if it can be provided. Bare galvanised wire absorbs urine, so it’s unsuitable rat cage material. A rat’s cage should be made of coated metal. Never locate a cage in direct sunlight or a draft area of the house. The cage should be placed in an area that allows the rat to see and feel a part of family activities. Although rats are basically ground dwellers, they also love to climb, so their cage should offer vertical space and multiple platforms. Horizontal bars (rather than vertical) also offer built-in climbing opportunities. Cage bars must never be more than ½ inch apart. A space any wider will allow juveniles and females to squeeze through and escape or injure themselves. Aquarium tanks should not be used as permanent housing for rats, since they make it difficult to provide adequate ventilation. As a rat’s urine and poo breaks down they will release ammonia. This gas will collect in a poorly ventilated glass tank, harming the rat’s respiratory system.

**Bedding: Absorbent And Dust Free:**
*Rats need around an inch of absorbent bedding on the floor of their enclosure to provide them with a sense of security and an opportunity to burrow. Bedding serves the added important purpose of absorbing moisture*
from waste. Recommended bedding includes non-aromatic wood shavings, reclaimed wood pulp, and recycled paper products are all good choices. Avoid fine sawdust, since it creates high levels of dust that can lead to eye irritations and respiratory infections. Cedar and pine based products cause respiratory problems and must never be used. Newspapers should also be avoided since the ink can harm a rat if ingested. Soiled bedding must be removed daily, and bedding should be changed completely once a week. If you use corn cob bedding change it often to protect against the build up of bacteria and mould. Also do not use corn cob bedding with a pet that may ingest bedding.

Cage Furnishings: Provide Opportunities To Exercise, Chew, And Rest:

Highly intelligent animals, rats must be provided with a variety of challenging and safe toys. These toys should be rotated to keep them interesting for the pet. Balls and tubular toys are always popular with rats. Since they enjoy climbing, rats will also make good use of ladders, hammocks and multilevel platforms in their cages. All rodent toys are designed to stand up to constant chewing, but nevertheless, a rat’s playthings should be checked constantly for signs of damage. Many rats also like exercise wheels. The rat keeper should make sure to select a wheel that’s large enough for the pet. Wheels should also be solid, since open rung models can trap a rat’s tail. Like all rodents, rat’s teeth are growing constantly. To keep these teeth trim, a rat must gnaw on something hard on a regular basis. If a rat has nothing to chew, it will eventually be unable to close its mouth, and will starve. Wooden chew toys designed especially for rodents are available in a variety of shapes, sizes and aromas. Chew toys should be inspected on a daily basis, and replaced if they’re soiled or excessively worn. When they’re not playing or chewing, rats like to rest, so a nesting box or large cozy tubular structure should be placed in their cages.

Playtime Outside 'The Cage: Roaming In A Rat-Proof Room:

Highly intelligent animals, rats should also be let out of their cage for at least an hour a day to explore a “rat proof” room of the house. Make sure all doors and windows to this room are closed, and that dogs, cats and other pets are kept away. Also check to make sure that there are no openings, even ones as tiny as ½ inch in diameter that a rat can squeeze through. The areas below and behind heavy furniture should be blocked, all wires should be covered and household cleaning chemicals or other potentially toxic material like ant traps should not be accessible. Have a small backup cage in the rat play room, so the pet has a place to retreat to. It’s a good idea to place a small treat in this get-away spot, so it becomes familiar to your pet. Always stay close to your pet in the room and be aware of his movements. For added fun, consider setting up a maze with a prize at the end for your rat to master. Some people find it easier and safer to limit their rat’s outings to the top of a large table or bathtub.
Lighting:
Rats have no special lighting requirements, other than a 12-hour on/12-hour off day/night cycle.

Temperature & Humidity: Very Tolerant:
Rats became one of the most widely distributed animals in the world in large measure because they are able to tolerate a wide range of climatic conditions. 60 degrees to 90 degrees with a 30-50% humidity is ideal for them. They are usually very content at an average room temperature.

Food & Diet: Opportunistic Omnivores:
In the wild, rats are renowned for eating just about anything. Pet rats are usually just as easy to please, but their health and well-being demands that they eat a balanced diet designed to meet their specific nutritional needs. Rat and mouse prepackaged mixes or rat and mouse food blocks, especially those listing soy as the main ingredient, offer good nutrition and help wear down the teeth. Commercial food also provides the perfect combination of protein, minerals, vitamins and fibre to maintain good health – formulas containing small, hard biscuits will also help to wear down the teeth. Follow the manufacturer’s guidelines regarding daily portions. Typically, this will mean feeding the rat 3-4 tablespoons of mixes or 2-3 blocks every day. Also use common sense and watch your rats for signs of over or under eating. Small amounts of fresh vegetables should also be given each day, but avoid vegetables grown from bulbs, such as onions. Though rats are omnivores, they do not need to eat meat so long as their diet offers enough protein. Though rats will most likely eat anything put before them, never offer ‘junk food’ or table scraps, since this can lead to obesity. Remove uneaten vegetables promptly, and discard uneaten dry food daily.

Water: They Need Plenty Of Fresh Water:
Rats need a constant supply of clean, fresh chlorine-free water. Use a cage-mounted animal drinking bottle rather than a dish, choosing one with a chew-proof metal tip. If a bowl is used, choose a heavy ceramic model that cannot easily be tipped over. Change the water daily, and check for leakage – the water should only come out when the animal sips at the tube. Check also that the animal hasn’t caused a blockage by kicking substrate up the spout.

How to Handle A Rat: A rat that is handled regularly from an early age will readily accept being picked up by his human companion. Speak gently to the rat when approaching in early handling sessions, and reward him with a small treat. Always make sure that the room is “rat proof” before picking up a rat, in case the animal gets away. Pick up a rat by gently placing one hand behind the head, then grasp the animal around the rib cage and, supporting his hindquarters with your other hand, lift him up toward you. Once you’ve done this, cradle the rat against your body using as little restraining force as possible. Another option is to place your hand behind the rat, then slip your thumb under its body by the forelimbs below the lower jaw, and gently roll it over in your palm. It’s not a good idea to pick up a rat by the tail, since this can tear the skin. Allow a rat to grow accustomed to being handled at his own pace. If he wants to jump out of your hands, do not attempt to restrain him. Either put him back in the cage, or if you’re sure the room is rat safe, lower him to a few inches above the ground and let him go, then pick him up again. A rat will be more relaxed when held facing toward you rather than away from you. Always wash your hands before and after handling a rat or any small animal.

Rats Around The House: As soon as the rat is hand-tamed, it should be allowed to play outside the cage in a secure, rat-proofed area for an hour or so each day, under the strictest supervision. Cats and dogs should be elsewhere in the house, electrical cords must be picked up off the floor, and if possible the doors to the room should be closed. Rats can squeeze into the tiniest of openings, such as under a sofa or behind furniture, so make sure to block off any nooks and crannies the animal could wriggle into. Keep cleaning fluids and other hazardous materials out of harm’s way. Above all, observe the animal closely at all times. If the animal has an “accident” while roaming the house, clean it up immediately using an enzyme-based pet stain remover. Leaving any trace of the smell may tempt him to keep using that same spot as a toilet whenever he passes by.
Cleaning The Enclosure: Inspect the substrate daily, picking out droppings and removing uneaten food. Once a week, empty out the whole enclosure and clean the cage and all the accessories with hot, soapy water, using a scrubbing brush. Never use pine-scented products to clean small animal enclosures, since this can cause respiratory problems. Periodically disinfect the cage with a product designed for small animals, or a bleach solution, following the guidelines found earlier in this manual. Rats should be placed in a secure “holding” cage or tank while their cage is cleaned. Always wear gloves when cleaning a rat’s cage, and wash your hands afterward.

Common Rat Ailments: Though wild rats are notoriously hardy and disease-resistant, pet animals do not have the same immunities. Common first symptoms of illness include loss of appetite, unusual lethargy, hunching up, fluffed-up fur, half-closed eyes or laboured breathing. If a rat appears ill, immediate veterinary advice should be sought, since diseases can progress very quickly.

Red discharge from the eyes or nose – Although the rat may appear to be bleeding, this alarming red coloration is actually caused by a naturally occurring pigment in the mucus known as porphyrin. This discharge can be a sign of stress or respiratory infection. If the animal has other symptoms of illness, or if the discharge continues for more than a day, seek veterinary advice.

Abscesses and tumours – Abscesses, rapidly growing lumps that may feel hot to the touch, are usually the result of an infected bite and require immediate veterinary care. Odd lumps and bumps that develop more slowly are likely to be tumours – often benign, but potentially cancerous. Female rats are especially prone to mammary tumours. If caught early enough, tumours can often be removed surgically from healthy animals. Seek veterinary attention to determine an appropriate course of treatment for your rat.

Skin Irritation – the two main causes are parasite infestation and food allergies. A veterinarian can rule out or treat mite infestation, and the owner can test for food allergies. The veterinarian may also prescribe an ointment and trim the nails to prevent injury from excessive scratching. The foods that most commonly cause allergy problems are sunflower seeds, peanuts, and the coloured biscuits found in commercial rodent foods. By removing all these foods from the animal’s diet for a week, then re-introducing them one at a time every three days, it may be possible to discover the culprit. If no one food is isolated, the rat should be given only fresh food for a week, then have commercial food reintroduced to his diet. If this causes symptoms to re-appear, the cause is likely to be some additive or preservative in the commercial mix. Try switching brands until symptoms disappear.

Kidney failure – Excessive thirst and urine output accompanied by a swollen abdomen could signify renal failure. This serious condition requires immediate veterinary treatment. If the condition is not too far advanced, the vet may recommend a low protein diet.

Respiratory Disease – Unfortunately rats are prone to respiratory infections. Symptoms include reddish brown discharge around the nose and eyes, a rough hair coat, tilting of the head, hunching, sneezing, sniffling, coughing and laboured breathing. A respiratory infection can develop into a very serious condition, so a pet who exhibits even some of these symptoms should be taken to a veterinarian experienced in treating small animal ailments.

Safe Foods:

Rats should be fed a combination of ad lib fresh fruits and vegetables and small amounts of good quality rat pellets or rat cubes (ensure they have a protein content of at least 16% & fat content of 4-5%).

Some examples of suitable fruit and vegetables are: apples, pears, banana, melons, stone fruits, citrus fruits, broccoli, cabbage (not red cabbage), endive, carrots, Bok Choi/other Asian greens, celery, parsley, berries, fresh corn (small amount only) and peas.
Avoid feeding rats a seed/grain mix as these are too high in fat and sugar. Rats are very prone to becoming obese and malnourished on these mixes. They tend to ‘select’ their favourite bits in the mix and therefore miss out on important nutrients.

- The following should be considered as treats and only offered in very small amounts: Cereals, grains, seeds, breads, biscuits, sweets, cooked pasta and rice and breakfast cereals.
- Provide clean fresh water at all times.
- Any changes to the diet should be made gradually to avoid gastrointestinal upsets.

**Food to Avoid:**

Do not feed the following (please note that this is not an exhaustive list):

- Blue cheese
- Green bananas – inhibits starch-digesting enzymes
- Green potato skin
- Liquorice – suspected to cause neurological poisoning in rats
- Orange juice
- Mango
- Raw artichokes
- Raw dry beans or peanuts
- Raw red cabbage and Brussel sprouts
- Raw sweet potato
- Avocado
- Rhubarb
- Sticky foods such as peanut butter, some candy, and dried fruits – poses a choking hazard
- Seaweed

Source: [http://www.petsuppliesplus.com/AnimalCare/smanimal/rat.htm](http://www.petsuppliesplus.com/AnimalCare/smanimal/rat.htm)

And


Thank you and enjoy your new pet rats. 😊