



**PITTSBURGH RAT LOVERS CLUB
AND RESCUE
HANDOUT FOR RAT CARE**

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Visit our adoptable pet list at www.pghratrescue.petfinder.com

Visit our web site at www.pittsburghratloversclub.org

Visit our message board at <http://groups.google.com/group/pittsburgh-rat-lovers-club>

To join, visit the message board or send an email to managers@pittsburghratloversclub.org

Visit and join the facebook page [Rat Nation Shelter Of Pittsburgh](#)

OUR CLUB VETERINARIANS

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Animal General

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MORE THAN A RAT

As rat parents, we live the deepest love and suffer the most earnest sadness of a complete lifetime many times over in our own lives.

We watch our children grow from hesitant, shy or questioning pink babes to curious, rambunctious teenagers; testing the limits of their siblings, exploring new corners, new tunnels; tasting new baseboards or new boxes; stealing treats from each other; learning to ride on shoulders. We give them names like Stinky and Cookie and PoPo JeeJo, and talk about them with other rat parents.

We see them emerge as confident adults, enjoying the fruits of their environment but always content to go back home after a busy play time; sometimes slowly waking up from a full day of sleep as we return home; sometimes running to cage doors to greet us as we awake each morning to their loving faces, all tired out from a busy evening of nest-building, sibling-picking, cage-climbing fun. We are always and never surprised at their creativity.... waterfalls sculpted of stolen tissues, food bowls buried under mounds of litter, bedding surreptitiously moved from one location to another.

We watch the fullness of their adulthood, sometimes producing babes of their own, sometimes never recognizing they had been neutered. We cherish their response to our touch; amazed that such a perfect, intelligent creature could at all be interested in our voices, our hands, and our activities. Sometimes we stare forever at their feet...perfect in every way; or stroke a tail wrapped around our chin. We marvel at the connection we have - different than with a cat, or a dog, perhaps a bit of both, but always deeply emotional.

We watch them age, their fur growing less silky, less soft and shiny, their eyes clouding with time. Sometimes our hearts sink as we caress a small lump nestled under a leg or detect the telltale rattle of myco in an elderly breath where a churr used to be. We see the slowness of limbs and the thinning of bodies with time; feel the hipbones and the shoulder blades where once was hearty muscle. We often are confronted with the grumpiness that comes with elderly aches and pains and we respect that and touch with gentle kindness and compassionate understanding.

Within two to three years our little friends have lived a full life. To us, it is a microsecond. Just a moment in time that we have been blessed to be acquainted with one, or two, or twenty, of the most incredible creatures on this earth. We have laughed so hard we cried, we have learned so much and smiled even more. We have been delighted and saddened, comforted and heartbroken. There is no companion quite so devoted, so communicative, so loving and so mesmerizing as a rat.

~Cynthia Goehring 8/04

God Bless the Lovely Rat!



Pittsburgh Rat Lovers Club Rat Diet

CHOICE OF BASE DIET

Free Choice, minimum 2 to 4 blocks per rat per day depending on rat size

-Harlan Teklad Rodent Maintenance Diet #2014 (adult rats over 4 months of age)
-Harlan Teklad Rodent Maintenance Diet #2018 (pregnant or lactating moms, youngsters).

Available online at: Amazon or www.theratshop.com

-Oxbow Regal Rat Available Online at
Drsfostersandsmith, Chewy or locally at PetSmart

-LM Animal Farms Classic Mouse and Rat Food Available Online at Amazon

Also PRLC Managers listed on front of this handout sell either Harlan 2014 or Prolab RMH 1000 from their homes at \$2.00 per pound, typically sold in 5lb bags

Contact by phone/text to ensure availability of product

CHOICE OF DAILY ADDITIONS 1 teaspoon per rat

Cheerios (plain)	Dry or cooked whole wheat or tricolor pasta
Puffed Wheat	Grape Nuts Flakes
Puffed Kamut	Whole Wheat bread
Total Cereal	Dry Old Fashion Oats
Nutro Lite Dog Food (Lamb and Rice Formula)	

HEALTHY FRUITS AND VEGGIES TO ADD

Fruits and veggies one piece 1/2 inch wide, per rat

-raw or cooked carrots	-apple
-raw or cooked broccoli	-banana
-cooked or canned sweet potato (<u>not raw</u>)	-pear
-raw kale, green leaf or red leaf lettuce	-strawberries
-raw parsley	-watermelon
-frozen or fresh (not canned) peas (4 per rat)	-cantaloupe
-blueberries, raspberries, grapes (1 per rat)	
-dried fruits (1 small piece as weekly treat)	
-sunflower seeds (white striped, raw, 3 or 4 per rat once a week)	

OCCASIONAL TREAT

- unsalted, roasted peanut in the shell
- small piece chicken or turkey breast, microwaved or roasted, skinless
- small piece of other table food, use good judgment, healthy, low fat, low salt

STANDARD PET STORE RODENT BLOCKS. AND THE BAGGED MIXES WITH COLORFUL BITS AND PIECES, CORN, SEEDS AND NUTS ARE NOT A GOOD DIET FOR YOUR RAT!

DON'T FORGET FRESH WATER IN THE WATER BOTTLE EVERY DAY

Forbidden Foods: What not to feed your rats

Foods NEVER to feed your rat:

- **Licorice**—neurological poisoning
- **Raw dry beans/peanuts**—anti-nutrients that destroy vitamin a and enzymes rats need to digest proteins and starches. Also may cause red blood cells to clump.
- **Carbonated drinks**—rats can't burp, causes a significant amount of discomfort and god knows what else.
- **Raw sweet potato**—compounds form cyanide in the stomach.
- **Blue cheese**—the mold is toxic to rats.
- **Raw red cabbage**—antinutrient that destroys thiamin.
- **Raw brussel sprouts**—antinutrient that destroys thiamin.
- **Raw artichokes**—inhibits protein digestion
- **Green bananas**—makes it difficult to digest starches.
- **Green potato skin and eyes**—contains a toxin called solanine.
- **Rhubarb**- high levels of oxalates which bind up calcium
- **Raw bulk tofu**-can contain bacteria (packaged tofu is safe)
- **Orange juice**-contains d-limonene which can cause kidney cancer in *male* rats
- **Raw onion**- can lead to anemia and an upset stomach
- **Wild insects**-could carry parasites

Foods to feed with CAUTION—that is, not too often:

- **Carbonated drinks**- rats can't burp!
- **Chocolate**—contains stimulants that can cause heart failure or neurological poisoning. A bit of chocolate is okay and can actually temporarily alleviate respiratory distress.
- **Peanut butter**- this can cause choking in rats. If you want to give your rats some, mix it with jam.
- **Dried corn** (often sold as entire cobs in pet and feed stores) – it can have high levels of fungal contaminates which can lead to liver cancer. A little fresh corn is fine. Also watch out for cucumber, radishes, spinach, collards and turnip greens.
- **Beets**—include oxalates, which bind up calcium.

- **Almonds**—include oxalates, which bind up calcium.
- **Swiss chard**—include oxalates, which bind up calcium.
- **Avocados**- These are high in fat and are a good treat to feed rats that are in need of "beefing up" (make sure the fruit is ripe). However, the pit, rind, skin and leaves of avocados are toxic. The part of the fruit in contact with the pit has a higher concentration of toxins.

Reference: *Rat Health Care*, 7th Ed. by Debbie Ducommun. 2001.



PITTSBURGH RAT LOVERS CLUB

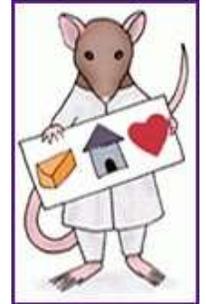
Housing Notice: Please read the 'Housing Needs' section provided by The Rat Guide.

PLEASE NOTE: Glass aquariums are not recommended for housing by The Pittsburgh Rat Lovers Club & Rescue (PRLC&R). We feel that an aquarium should only be used as a temporary environment (while cleaning the main cage) or for a medical necessity. PRLC&R does not recommend aquariums because of ammonia fume build-up (because of poor ventilation), lack of space, overheating, condensation, and breakage issues.

In addition, we feel aquariums do not facilitate interaction between the rats and their environment as well as wire cages. The solid glass walls block smells and sound, and make natural climbing behavior difficult to provide.

HOUSING NEEDS

There are several options for housing your pet rats. Whatever you choose keep in mind that the space you provide needs to be adequate for the number of rats housed. A rat's home needs to be a safe place. It is important to make sure that the housing you choose has sturdy latches and is escape proof. This is especially true when there are other pets in the household that might harm the rat or if you have other rats of the opposite sex housed under the same roof. Get the largest environment that you can afford. Rats are happiest when they have plenty of room to explore, climb, and play.



DO NOT USE: hamster cages, habitrains, plastic storage bins with lids, or 10-gallon aquariums as permanent housing for your rats.

Cleanliness is a must for rat housing. Providing a litter box will help to keep the cage cleaner and most rats learn quickly how to use them. Occasional wiping down of surfaces with warm water and changing cloth bedding as needed will keep the cage manageable in-between cleanings. Sterilization of the cage weekly will help eliminate odor, parasites, and bacteria. If you can smell that the cage is dirty then it is past time for a cleaning. Ammonia buildup can cause damage to their delicate respiratory systems and is easily controlled with a proper cleaning schedule.

Once you have decided on housing best for you and your rat, the next step is to purchase the items that will go into the cage. You will need a water bottle (two is better in case one gets a leak), proper bedding, hideaway areas, toys, nutritional food, and accessories to provide a healthy and stimulating environment for your rat.

Whatever you choose for your rats home be sure to keep on hand a small cage or carrier in case you have a rat that is ill or injured and needs to be kept isolated and quiet.

Choosing the environment

The most popular types of housing for rats are wire cages and homemade residences, each have pros and cons for both the people and the rats. When choosing be sure that the cage is appropriate for your home. If you live in an apartment (that allows rats) with no access to an outdoor hose you might want a cage that can fit into the shower stall for a good cleaning.

Also consider where you will be placing the rats' new home. You will want to keep your rat in an area of the home that is away from direct sunlight and heavy drafts. Air movement will not hurt the rats, but excessive drafts such as from a close fan or placing the rats beneath the air-conditioning/heating vent may adversely affect their body temperature. The room will need to be dark at night for them. Rats do need periods of total darkness or else they can experience health and even reproductive problems.

Placing the housing on a stand or a table is better than putting it directly on the floor. Your rat will be happier if it is placed in an area that allows interaction with you. Once the best spot is chosen you will need to make sure your new housing fits in the space you have designated for it.

Cages

Wire cages can be found in a variety of sizes, designs, and costs from both local pet stores and online resources. Typically the wire cage is the housing that most rat owners opt for. What you choose for bar spacing will depend on the size and age of your rats. Often ferret cages can be used for males and large females. Young rats and small females need spacing small enough to not allow them to escape or get stuck

in the bars. The floors of the cage should be solid. Wire floors can be covered with a variety of material such as plastic canvas, newspaper, towels, etc.

There are advantages to having a wire cage for your rat. The most important one is ventilation, the open wires keep ammonia fumes at a minimum. Wire cages also offer the rat more stimulation than some other types of rat housing by providing levels and ramps for them to move around on, walls to climb, places to hang accessories, and open access to daily interaction with the household.

Unfortunately there are also downsides to wire cages. The rat's food and litter tend to end up on the floor. Wire floors in cages can also cause foot injuries and can aggravate a condition known as bumblefoot in some rats. Covering the wire floors can alleviate this problem.

(It is important here to note that there have been comments to the effect that galvanized steel wire cages when chewed on can cause zinc poisoning in rats. This has not been effectively proven. Powder-coated cages are preferred for that reason and certainly for ease of cleaning.)

Homemade Cabinet Housing

Another housing option is the homemade cabinet style cages, sometimes referred to as "grotto" cages. With some tools, some materials, and a fair amount of motivation you can build a custom home for your rats.

One of the most wonderful things about the cabinet cage is the fact that the rat room remains much tidier than with a conventional cage system. Also with many levels it gives you plenty of places to have toys and hammocks to keep your rats environment stimulating.

The cabinet cage does have its drawbacks. Being heavy it isn't always easy to get it outdoors for a full sterilization and cleaning (periodically or when there are signs of illness or parasites) Adding wheels can make this easier. One of the important things to keep in mind with a cabinet cage is that the wood needs to be protected. Bare wood can soak up urine and in time this can become rather unpleasant for both you and the rat.

Cage Links

Home-made & cabinet cages:

The Dapper Rat "The Grotto" <http://www.dapper.com.au/grotto.htm>

Round Cage Plans

<http://www.ratfanclub.org/cagepln2.html>

Commercial Cage sites

Martins Cages

<http://www.martinscages.com/products/cages/rat/>

Cage Dimensions Calculator-

<http://www.kristinewickstrom.homestead.com/files/PanelApplet.html>



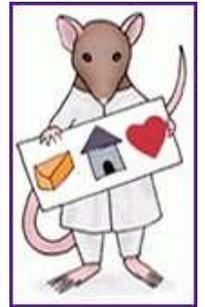
A LAYMAN'S GUIDE TO BASIC CARE AND RESPONSIBLE OWNERSHIP OF RATS

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CAGE ACCESSORIES

Your rats will be spending a lot of time in their cages. You need to add accessories that will make your rats comfortable and secure. Another very important reason to provide cage accessories is to keep them occupied. It has been proven that mental stimulation actually can increase intelligence.

Fortunately there are many ways to outfit a rat cage to turn it into a comfortable and interesting environment using both homemade and store bought items. When shopping at the pet stores check out the accessories for other animals besides rats such as ferrets, chinchillas, birds, etc. Even the local hardware store and the dollar store can be a source of cage accessories. Creativity is the key to setting up a happy and safe environment for your rats.



Beds and Nests

Rats spend quite a bit of time sleeping and lounging around. Warm cozy beds and lofty sleeping spots are both equally important for your rat.

Warm and cozy beds

You will need to provide your rat with a nest box that he can hide in to sleep. You can find items at the pet store such as large igloos, chinchilla bathhouses, roll-a-nest beds, ferret ball connectors, roll-a-nest balls, and log cabin homes among others. On a more creative side you can use plastic bowls turned upside down with a large hole drilled in it, 4" PVC pipe, sturdy cardboard boxes, and even plastic storage boxes with holes notched into them. There are many possibilities.

Once you have the bed(s) provide your rat with material that he can make a nest with. Some rats are very avid nest builders and will enjoy setting up their beds. Some good suggestions are non-stringy fabric, Carefresh bedding, shredded paper, paper towels, etc. Be sure to change the nesting material often. Ammonia resulting from urine can be harmful to the rat especially in a small confined area such as a nesting bed. *Lofty lounges*

Rats love to get up high off the ground. Rats love hammocks, soft sleeping tubes, and hanging hideaways. Hammocks are a must for a rat cage. They come in many sizes and styles. You can purchase cozy fleece lined hammocks, ones with pockets, or lightweight lounge hammocks. Many pet stores offer ferret cage accessories, these can be used and are particularly good for larger rats. One of the advantages to having a wire cage is that it provides a good place where you can hang these versatile beds.

Making your own hammocks and soft tubes is easy. If you sew it is possible to really go all out and design fancy ones. If you aren't able to sew you can fashion hammocks out of towels, scrap fabric, cloth place mats, cloth diapers, or old clothes. Tubes can be fashioned from pant legs cut off and hung within the cage. Homemade hammocks and soft tubes can be hung with safety pins, diaper pins, grommets, chains, hooks, or any other method that holds them secure.

Hard tubes can be bought in the ferret section. These tubes connect and hang with chains. They come in different colors and are transparent so that you can view the rat. PVC pipe and drainage pipe will also work and can be drilled and hung.

Toys

Rats just want to have fun so provide them with things to play with. The best toy they will have, of course, is you. Interaction, hand wrestling, training and play time out of their cage with you are the most important activities that your rats can have. During the times that you are not around though, other toys will make the rats' life more fun.

Wheels

An exercise wheel is a great cage accessory if your rat will use it. Be sure to provide only a gridded wire wheel, plastic Wodent Wheel or one of the solid metal type wheels to prevent injury.

Treat Toys

Treat toys are always a big hit. You can find toys that hold treats at your pet store such as hanging treat balls, the Bunny Ka-Bob, Boredom Busters, the Pick-a-Peanut, and the Bounce Back Pet Rat toy. Slotted cat balls with the ball removed and treats stuffed in make a great, inexpensive toy.

For a simple homemade treat toy, you can put treats and paper towels (they'll use them for bedding) in a small cardboard box and watch as your rats busily demolish it to get their treat. You can also attach fruit or hard treats with holes drilled into them to a large binder ring and attach it to the side of the cage.

Climbing

Rats love to climb. You can outfit your cage with such things as ladders, ropes, wooden bird branches, and climbing tubes. You will find many good climbing toys in the ferret and bird department of the pet store. Take care to not use climbing toys in the cages of elderly or ill rats.

Digging Boxes

In the wild rats forage and dig. Giving them a digging box is a safe way to let them indulge in this natural behavior. To create a digging box all you need is a plastic box, such as a litter box for cats or a low plastic storage box, and a bag of sterile potting soil. Make sure the soil has no fertilizers or other additives. You can add seeds to grow oat grass, wheat grass, millet, rye. Add enough moisture to grow the grass, but not enough to cause fungus or mold growth. Assorted rocks and a PVC tunnel partially buried create an even more interesting environment. For fun you can hide treats in the digging box for your rat. Your rats digging box can either be in or outside of the cage. If you leave it in the cage you will have to clean it and replace the soil regularly.

Cage Flooring

If your floors are made from wire mesh you should cover most, if not all, of the floor with something to protect your rats' feet. Too often rats get sprains or breaks from getting their feet caught in the cage floor. Having a floor that wire spacing is $\frac{1}{4}$ " x $\frac{1}{4}$ " will help to reduce injury. The other problem with wire floors is that it can aggravate bumble foot. There are many good options for making the cage floors safe. Floor covering options are placemats (cloth or plastic), needlepoint canvas, newspaper, and non-stick rubber shelf liner.

Feeding & Water Bottles

Rats are free feeders and require a constant supply of food. Food dishes need to be heavy and low so that they cannot be spilled. Two other options are food dishes that mount to the side of the cage and food hoppers that dispense food. Any wet or perishable food should go in a separate food dish. If you have rats that stash their food be sure to not overfeed them and remove any perishable food before they begin to decompose.

Water is the most important thing your rat needs. Always make sure that clean water is available. Do not put water in an open bowl. Your rat will either tip it over or fill it up with bedding. There are several good types of water bottles. Most mount on the outside of the cage with a sipper tube that fits in-between the bars. If your rats have an open cage it may be necessary to protect the top of the plastic water bottles from chewers. You can do this by putting an empty can or a small plastic bowl over the top of it.



Multiple water bottles are a good idea so that if one bottle leaks or is empty they will still have another to drink from. Always make sure that the bottle's seal or gasket is in place and that the bottle does not drip. Be sure to clean and sanitize the bottle thoroughly each week.

Shelves & Ledges

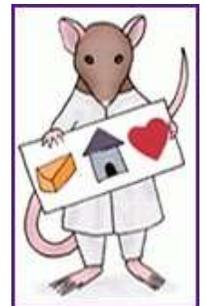
Rats enjoy multiple levels in their cages. A few products that can add levels are moveable bird platforms, hanging baskets, and level sized ferret hammocks. Ferret tubes connected together can be attached to the side (both inside and out) or top of the cage and used as a way to get from one platform to the next. You can also cut coated wire shelving to size and attach it to the cage using wire ties. Another good idea is to use wire baskets. The tiered baskets that hold fruit can be suspended from the center of a large open cage. For smaller cages wire baskets can be attached with cable ties.

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CAGE BEDDING & LITTER

Choosing the litter and cage bedding for your rats' environment is important. Whatever product you decide to use be sure that you change it often to keep your rat healthy. The buildup of ammonia and fecal bacteria can be extremely harmful to your rats' respiratory system. Occasionally rats will be allergic to certain types. If this occurs then try different products until you find one that does not cause a reaction. In cases of severe allergies cloth (old T-shirts, towels, etc.) can be used as a substitute for conventional bedding. Although there are many excellent choices there are also some that are dangerous for your rat.



Unacceptable Cage Bottom Bedding Choices

Cedar or Pine

Cedar and pine are choices that you want to avoid. Unfortunately they are usually sold in pet stores right next to the rodent supplies. Tests have shown that the phenols (aromatic hydrocarbons) that are found in these softwoods are toxic to rats and other small animals. This toxic substance is what makes the litter have the strong smell, which covers up the odors of urine but at a hazardous cost to your rat. It is the oils containing these phenols that you find in many household cleaning products like pine-fresh and pine-sol.

If you use pine or cedar you are jeopardizing your rats' health in several ways. Long term inhalation of these chemicals can compromise the rats' immune system making it more prone to respiratory problems such as mycoplasma. It has also been scientifically documented that the phenols in these softwoods alter the levels of the liver enzymes, which can lead to liver disease and even liver failure.

Clay Cat Litter

Clay cat litter is too dusty to be used to line the entire bottom of a rats' environment. Use only small amounts of large granule, non-dusty, non-clumping clay litter in litter boxes.

Corn Cob Bedding

When wet, corncob bedding tends to rot and grow mold causing an unpleasant odor and an increase in bacteria within the animals' environment. If you opt to use corn cob on the cage bottom then keep in mind that it has to be changed often. Corn Cob is best used in the litter box itself.

Preferred Cage Bedding Choices

Shredded Paper

Shredded paper can be used for your rats bedding. It must be changed often as it tends to get mushy when wet. Make sure that if you use shredded newspaper that it is printed with non-toxic soy or vegetable ink. Keep in mind that light colored rats will end up with dirty looking fur from the ink.

Aspen

Aspen is a very good choice for bedding. Being a hardwood, there are no toxic phenols in it making it a safe choice for your rat. The only problem with aspen is that it can be messy and difficult to vacuum.

CareFresh

CareFresh is made from paper pulp. It has the appearance of shredded gray egg carton material. Rats seem to like this product.

Pellet Bedding

The most popular used pellet bedding is Yesterdays News. It is manufactured from recycled newspaper and was originally intended to be an alternative cat litter. Many pet owners use it satisfactorily. The one problem with yesterdays News is that it does tend to crumble and get dusty after it has been wet and then dried out.

Other pellet bedding products on the market are made from different materials such as compressed aspen, wheat grass, and cellulose fiber (Cell-sorb Plus).

Cloth

Cloth is a useful alternative to conventional cage bedding especially if the rats, or their owners, have allergies. Old, clothing, fabric diapers, towels, and remnants make good choices. Be sure to use cloth that does not unravel easily. Long strings can get caught around the rats' appendages and cause injury. This is particularly a concern with babies and young rats.

Wash the fabric bedding with a hypoallergenic laundry detergent using warm or hot water. Occasional washing with a small amount of bleach is fine as long as the load of laundry is washed again using detergent only or put through two rinse cycles. If you can detect any bleach odor after washing then please run them through another complete cycle.

Cloth used in nest boxes will need to be changed more frequently if you have rats that urinate in their beds.

Litter Boxes

Keeping litter boxes in your cages will help with maintaining overall cage cleanliness. Rats are, for the most part, easily trained to use a litter box. Some suggested litters are soft corncob litter, crushed walnut shells, and Swheat Scoop. Bedding materials can also be used in litter boxes as long as it is not the same type that you use on the cage floor. Using a different material in the litter box will help the rat differentiate between its floor and its toilet area. Unfortunately most rats will not urinate in their litter boxes regularly. But even if it only catches the feces it is still a great aide in helping your rats'

Environment stay cleaner.

CareFresh- (paper) Absorption Corporation
<http://www.absorbent.com>

Cage Bedding & Litter Links

Yesterday's News- (newspaper pellet)
Canbrands International Ltd.
<http://www.yesterdaysnews.com>

Cell Sorb Plus- (recycled newspaper) Fangman Specialties (paper) <http://www.cell-sorb-plus.com>

Gentle Touch Litter (aspen pellets)



Gentle Touch Corporation (402) 371-3311

Critter Country (wheat pellets) Mountain Meadow Pet Products, Inc.
<http://www.mtnmeadowspet.com/>

Kozy Korner Ferret Litter- (newspaper) Sheppard & Greene
(800) 851-6661

Aspen Supreme- (aspen pellets) Green Pet Products
<http://www.greenpet.com/aspenpet.htm>

Cellu-Dri - (recycled cellulose fiber) Shepherd Specialty Papers
http://www.ssponline.com/cellu_dri.htm

All God's Creatures Litter- (hard wood chips) Northeastern Products Corp. 1-800-873-8233

Bio-Flush- (newspaper) Ampro Industries Inc. (800) 482-3130

Swheat Scoop- (wheat) Pet Care Systems, Inc.
<http://www.swheatscoop.com>

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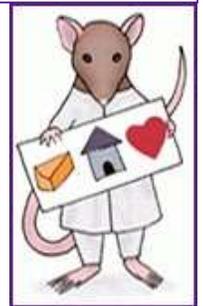
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TRAINING & PLAYTIME

Rat Proofing

Play time and exploration outside of the cage is a big part of your rat's life. Learn to be aware of what can harm your rat and what your rat can harm. It is wise to rat proof as much as possible before you let your rat free roam. Keep in mind that some males do urine mark and that any rat will have accidents if left out too long.

Other Tips For Free Roam



Things that can harm your rat

- Anything that does not say "non toxic" may be toxic to your rats.
- Cover furniture or rugs with a sheet or blanket to prevent marking damage.
- Stuff the pillows down on couches so the rat can't get inside the furniture.
- Remove drinks and vases so they won't be knocked over.
- Provide a portable litter box for free roam time.
- Make sure there is access to food and water if the free time is long.
- Do not forget to put your rat back into its cage.
- Try not to fall asleep while your rat is out.
- Block the entries to spaces under dressers and other furniture where your rat may hide.
- Close the cupboards.
- Don't let them play in the laundry room.

- Keep them from urinating on any electronics.
- Do not allow smoking in the rats free roam area.
- Other animals in the area
- Open toilet lids
- Electrical wires and cords
- Harmful chemicals or poisons
- Small areas where the rat can hide from you
- Getting under appliances
- Certain types of plants
- Low heater vents
- Soap Medications and ointments
- Doors being opened or closed
- Cigarettes and ashtrays
- Cleaning agents
- Lit candles
- Hot burners
- Any exits to the outside
- Trash cans
- People walking through the area

Things Your Rat Can Damage

- Window blinds and curtains
- Telephone wires
- Cable cords
- Phones
- Potted plants
- Computer wires
- Clothing
- Baseboards and trim
- Candles
- Wallpaper
- Craft supplies
- Drywall
- Remotes
- Furniture (wood & fabric)
- Telephones
- Paper documents
- Carpets and rugs

Rats need and enjoy interaction and look forward to time spent with you. Their intelligence is higher than most other rodents making training and play time a joy. Be sure to make such activities not only fun, but also safe for your rat.

When your rat is outside of its cage prepare the area first by rat proofing. Do not involve your rat in activities that will scare him. You can lose its trust and rats will sometimes bite when scared. Be sure that other pets that may harm your rat are securely put away before out of the cage playing or training.

Make sure that your rat is comfortable and unafraid. It is best to first get to know your pet so that it will be secure through trust training.



Trust Comes First

Before training or play comes trust. If you have had your rat as a companion then in all likelihood the bond of trust has been established.

With a new rat you have to start from square one. Here we will discuss trust training with a skittish rat. Rats showing aggression need to be handled a little differently and will be discussed in another behavior article.

First let the rat get used to the new cage and surroundings. Make sure that the cage has an opening large enough for you to get both hands into. Then approach it carefully with snacks. Be sure to keep your fingers safe with a new rat. Put soft food on a spoon to not only protect your fingers, but to keep the rat in place while eating rather than running back and hiding in a corner with the food. Laying your arm inside of the cage will help get the rat used to you. Often their natural curiosity will inspire the bravery for the rat to explore your arm.

As your rat becomes more comfortable try picking it up gently from the sides and holding it. Use both hands to pick the rat up. Do not pick the rat up by its tail. This is frightening to the rat and can cause injuries such as tail degloving. Hold it gently and securely. If the rat's tail begins to whip around it means that it is frantically trying to regain its balance. Be sure to support the rat's hind legs to prevent making it feel as if its balance is off. If the rat becomes agitated then return it to the cage and try again later.

You may find that some rats are more responsive during certain times of the day. Rats can have their own schedules, although they will usually adjust to yours. Talk soothingly to the rat. Let it know that you are not to be feared and that you are the provider of treats.

Once your rat is comfortable being held, just spend time with it by having him ride on your shoulder or hanging out with you while you are relaxing, then you can begin playing more and training.

Training

Rats learn quickly. Using positive reinforcements such as treats and praise will ensure that your pet rat is eager to learn. The mental stimulation that training provides will enhance the rat's natural intelligence.

When teaching your rat a trick, for instance coming to his name, repeat the word while holding a treat. When he comes to you release the treat to him, praise him verbally, and/or reward by giving physical contact such as scratching or by holding him. One of the most useful things you can train your rat to do is to use a litter box. You will find detailed training instructions here.

Things to remember when training your rat is that the rat's own personality may determine what tricks it will be best at. Active females often do better at tricks that require agility and speed.

Some rats are smarter than others are. Gearing the training to the rat's activity level and intelligence will save both you and your rat from becoming frustrated.

Be sure that there are not a lot of distractions during training time. Keeping the training area consistent will help to keep the rat's natural instinct to explore new things at bay. Do not try to train male rats where female rats have recently been, or vice versa. The scent will distract them and the training session will be useless.

Keep your training session's short-between 10 and 15 minutes. Never punish your rat if it doesn't perform.

The Key Components of Training

- Trust
- Positive reinforcement
- Consistency

Some Training Activities

- Coming to its name
- Learning the word "No"
- Maze running
- Rope walking or climbing
- Repetition
- Patience
- Agility courses
- Retrieving articles
- Standing on hind legs
- Harness & leash training
- Roll-about Ball training
- Obstacle course running
- Clicker training
- Litter box use

Play Time

There is a strong possibility that the term "play time" was created by rats. They love to play both inside and outside of their cage (in a rat-proofed area). From the time they are very tiny till they reach old age most rats will enjoy playing with each other and with you.

Note: Do not let the male and female rats play together after the age of 5 weeks. Rats can reproduce at a very young age. They also can mate faster than you can blink, so don't assume that you can let them play together just because you are supervising them. Also, do not assume that an elderly male or female cannot still have working reproductive organs.

Playing - Babies

Baby rats begin actively playing with each other after their eyes have opened at around two weeks of age. A good breeder should not only play with them as babies, but should also actively play with them on a daily basis.

At this age most of the play activity will be chasing and wrestling. To be a part of this play put your hand inside the cage and with your hand "mimic" them as if it was another rat. Then you can join in the chasing and the wrestling in their environment. Using verbal prompts when playing will get them even more excited, it will also be useful through their lives as a signal that its time to play.

When playing with the babies in the cage, be sure to keep an eye on the mother. Different mothers don't always react in the same way to the intrusion of a hand into their nursery area. Some mothers pay no attention, some mothers will join in the play, but some mothers may show aggression towards you.

Be sure to provide the babies with plenty of cage items that they can climb on and crawl through. Playing with the babies also will need to take place outside of the cage by supervised free roam, handling, and walking around them. Babies move fast and need to be watched closely.

Playing - Adolescence & Adulthood

Even after weaning, young rats will often enjoy hand wrestling both in and out of the cage. During this stage of their development more playtime needs to occur out of the cage. Try to make time every day to give your rat time out. Be sure to plan play areas where your rat can safely explore.

Make sure that the cage is equipped with toys, especially if you can't spend a lot of time with your rat. Some suggestions for cage toys are a safe exercise wheel, levels, ramps, treat toys, and tubes.

Another way to give your rat a fun activity is to put boxes in the cage or paper bags that can be remodeled to fit the rat's tastes.

Interactive games are also fun. One good example is tearing paper into strips and giving it to the rat piece by piece while it is in the cage. Your rat will scramble to take the paper, put it away, and come back for more. If you have a group of rats they will all join in, sometimes setting up a system to get the paper where they want it by passing it to each other like a bucket brigade. Of course if you don't feel like handing them paper for an hour you can always give them a box of unscented Kleenex and just sit back and watch the fun. Use your imagination to come up with fun activities for you and your rats.

Playing - Older Rats

As your rats get older they will inevitably slow down and play less. This tends to particularly be true with males. Females in general tend to have a higher energy level throughout their lives.

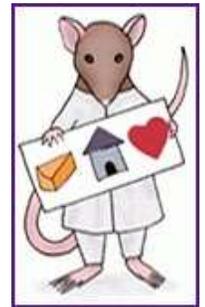
Continue to play with them at whatever level they seem comfortable with. They will let you know if they are not interested. Often older rats prefer quiet play such as time out laying with you and being help and petted. As fun as young rats can be, nothing compares to the quiet companionship of an older rat.



A LAYMAN'S GUIDE TO BASIC CARE AND RESPONSIBLE OWNERSHIP OF RATS

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TOYS



Creativity is the keyword here. One doesn't need to buy every toy made out there. You may find that your pet rat will think that empty toilet paper tube makes a wonderful place to hide in, or the shoe box you decided was taking up closet space will be a great place to take a nap in. How about wrapping a yummie up in a piece of tissue and watching your rattie enjoy taking it apart and eating the contents.

I kept one of the kids old Fisher Price farmhouses and all my rats love to go in and out of the windows and lay on the little shelves.

Another clever and inexpensive Hidey idea (submitted by Virginia Simpson) is to take a child's plastic lunch box (can often be found at Goodwill for 50cents) and cut a round hole on each narrow side of it for cage furniture. Get more than one and place them together or stack them for a multilevel condo. You can also use just one with one hole in the narrow side to make a great den or to carry a scared or shy rat in.

An excellent homemade play area for ratties is to make up a digging box. It is very easy to do and relatively inexpensive. Take a small plastic box (a small cat litter box is ideal) and fill it with sterile potting soil; throw in some bird seed, wheat or rye grass and sprinkle with water. It will only take a couple of days for the grass to grow. You might have to show your ratties what this box is for the first time they are put in it. You can do that by partially hiding some of their favorite treats in the dirt for them. It's a guaranteed winner and it's lots of fun to watch them at play.

For additional suggestions on homemade toys and keeping your ratties entertained, check out The Dapper Rat at <http://www.dapper.com.au/>.

If you are still looking for toys to buy, there is the Wodent Wheel which is perfect for rats, as well as rat shaped toys by Super Pet that hold yummies that your pet rat can dig out of the holes in the bases to eat.

<http://www.transoniq.com> <http://www.ferretstore.com/>



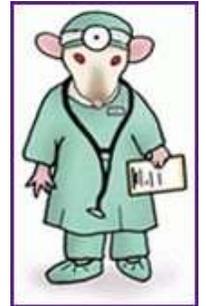
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HEALTH CHECK

Rats often don't exhibit sign of illness until they are well into a medical emergency. It is important to check your rat often for any medical abnormalities.

Any time that you handle your rat is an opportunity to check it for problems. Awareness of your rat's physique and behavior will help you see any changes that indicate the need for a trip to the vet.



Health checks are easier if your rat is a willing subject. It is helpful to get your rat used to being checked and held on its back.

The Health Check:

- 1. Breathing:** Learn to spot symptoms of respiratory infections before they become advanced to the point of emergency intervention. Listen for abnormal breathing sounds such as wheezing, congestion, or clicking noises. Note any abnormalities such as labored breathing, gasping. Other signs may include; discharge from the eyes or nose, poor appetite, hunched posture, or puffed up fur. A rat with a respiratory infection will need to be seen by your veterinarian. Signs that appear to be respiratory related may actually be problems with the heart.
- 2. Teeth:** Look at the rat's teeth and gums to see if there is any misalignment of teeth, gum swelling, redness, pus, or foul odor. The incisors should be even, not too long, and not piercing the cheek or gum. Oral infections can be aggressive and need early medical intervention to be resolved.
- 3. Eyes:** Check the rat's eyes to assure that they are clear, bright, and free of discharge. Look for cloudiness or ulcerations. Bulging eyes may be indicative of SDAV infection, tumors, or an abscess behind the eye.
- 4. Ears:** Check the rat's ears for discharge, growths, or unusual odors.
- 5. Injuries and Wounds:** Visually inspect your rat's body for bleeding, cuts, bites, and bruising.
- 6. Tail and Feet:** Visually inspect your rat's tail and feet for injuries and for symptoms of bumblefoot (feet) and ringtail (tail).
- 7. Movement:** Remove your rat from its cage and watch it walk. Keep your eyes open for trembling, limping, tilting, circling, or weakness in the limbs. Note the general posture and the activity level. A rat exhibiting a "hunched up" posture or lethargy may not be feeling well.
- 8. Body:** Carefully massage the rat's body with your fingers checking for lumps, swelling, or areas of sensitivity that might indicate growths, swelling, or pain.

- 9. Fur and Skin:** Watch your rat's behavior to see if it is scratching excessively and check for any hair loss. Look at the skin and fur for possible parasites. Fleas and lice are large enough to see. Mites are harder to see, but often you will see nits on the hair shaft or a characteristic scabbing around the rat's shoulders and neck.
- 10. Genital Area:** *Female:* Examine your female rat's vaginal opening for any discharge or blood. In a non pregnant rat this could mean a problem such as a uterine infection (often mycoplasma), cysts, or tumor. *Male:* In a male check the penis for discharge. (Occasionally you will need to inspect closer by pushing back the sheath to make sure that there is no blockage.)
- 11. Color:** Check the extremities (feet, ears, tail, paws, etc.) for either pale or heightened skin color.
- 12. Odor:** Sniffing your rat may help alert you to problems. Learn your rat's "normal" odor. A "bad" smell may be indicative of infection. A sickly sweet smell could be diabetes.
- 13. Hydration:** You can perform what is called a "pinch test" to check for dehydration. Using two fingers take a little fold of skin on the rat's back and lift it up. When you let go the skin should return to its normal position. If the skin stays raised, even for a few seconds, your rat may be dehydrated.
- 14. Temperature:** Get to know what your rat's normal temperature "feels" like so you can recognize when the rat is too cool to the touch or fevered.

Reference: <http://ratguide.com>. 2000-2008.

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Rat Sitter

If you are local in the Pittsburgh/Washington County Vicinity & are in need of a Rat Sitter Lisa Dunsey Manager at The Pittsburgh Rat Lovers Club & Rescue & Owner/Operator of Rat Nation of Pittsburgh Shelter offers trusted & affordable rat sitting

All money given for Rat Sitting is used as a donation to buy food & supplies for all the rescue rats of Rat Nation Shelter. We ask for \$5 a day per rat cage group up to 4 rats per group/per cage, \$5 more per day for each additional group. Payable at time of drop off.

Rat Owner must give advance notice of dates needed for rat sitting. Rat Owner does not need to bring a cage or rat food but can bring special food if they prefer. Rat Owner should bring a personal item of the rats to put in their cage with them that they are attached to ex: favorite hammock, blanket, hidey house or toy etc.

Rat owner is responsible for dropping off rat(s) to Lisa Dunsey's home located at the back part of Upper St Clair by McMurray & for picking up their rat once back from Vacation/trip.

Must make appointment with Lisa for drop off & pick up.

If interested contact Lisa either by email: rdunsey@msn.com or text at [412 999 8178](tel:4129998178)