

Rats as Pets

Many people, upon hearing the word "rat", think of vermin, sewers, parasites, dirt, and germs. These same people don't realize there is a whole different side to rats: pets. Just as dogs are different from wolves, and housecats are different from wild cats, our pet rats are very different from their wild counterparts. Pet rats are often described as being the best of dogs and the best of cats put together in one tiny package. They can be litter trained, learn their name, come when called, and taught other fun tricks. Rats also don't need daily walks, won't disturb the neighbors with noise, won't leave large messes on the carpet, and don't require daily brushing. If you are interested in rats as pets, or think you might change your mind about them, read on for more information.



Photo: Tricia Jennings



Additional Resources

Pet Information Packets

<http://www.petinfopackets.com/rats/ratinfopacket.html>

Rat Behavior

<http://www.ratbehavior.org>

Rat Help

<http://www.rathelp.org>

Rat Guide

<http://www.ratguide.com>

RMCA Rat and Mouse FAQs

<http://www.rmca.org/Resources/faqs.htm>

Pet Rat Information Sheet

<http://www.quite.co.uk/rats/>

Rats as Pets

<http://ratz.co.uk/petrat.html>

Especially for Newbies Articles

<http://e4n.kuddlycorner4u.com/index.html>

Rat Articles

<http://www.dapper.com.au/articles.htm>

Goosemoose Pet Portal Forums

<http://www.goosemoose.com>

Northern Illinois Rat Organization

NIRO

P.O. Box 1507

Yucaipa, CA 92399

<http://www.niro-usa.org>

E-mail: niroirat@gmail.com

Northern Illinois Rat Organization

... the building blocks toward a brighter future

Pet Rats - an introduction

Domestic rats are often overlooked when the search is on for a companion animal. Read on to learn more about these wonderful animals, the care they require, and check out the resource links for more information!



Photo: Kirstin Allan

<http://www.niro-usa.org>



Where should I buy a rat, and how many?

Many people start out getting their first pet rats in pet stores. Unfortunately pet stores are not the best sources. These rats are primarily bred for production, and come from the rodent equivalent of puppy mills. Instead, you should look for responsible, ethical breeders or rescues to adopt your first rats from. These breeders will put a lot of time and effort into breeding healthier, friendlier rats, and rescues are doing the challenging work of saving and re-homing animals that cannot be kept or are not being properly kept. Make sure you get two rats, as they are very social animals and will adjust to their new home better and thrive with the companionship of another rat. This will not make them less friendly towards you, but in fact may make them friendlier and more outgoing.

What kind of housing should my rat have?

Wire cages are the best housing environment for a rat. They offer adequate ventilation, plenty of space for the rat to run and play while in the cage, and offer more options for hanging hammocks or toys. Look for the biggest cage you can afford, and make sure it is powder coated, not bare galvanized steel. Although more expensive, cages are by far the better investment when housing rats. You have a variety of options when choosing bedding for your rats. Never

use pine or cedar wood bedding. These contain chemicals that can be harmful to your rat's respiratory and liver health. Instead you have a variety of alternatives, including aspen wood bedding (which do not contain the same chemicals as pine or cedar), paper-based bedding such as the popular brands Carefresh and Yesterday News, or even cloth such as towels or fleece.

What should I feed my new pet rat?

A good quality lab block is an excellent base diet. Harlan Teklad is the most highly recommended option, with Mazuri being an alternative. Another option is Oxbow, a nutritionally balanced kibble. You can also feed a homemade mix, with several recipes being available on the Internet. Your rats will also enjoy fresh fruits and vegetables in their diet. Do not use the mixes sold in pet stores, even though the label may say it is for rats. These mixes usually contain large amounts of corn which can contain a harmful fungus, seeds which are too high in fat and protein, and alfalfa pellets which rats cannot digest. Always provide your rats with fresh water.

Can my rats have toys?

Absolutely! In fact, rats love toys! Let your imagination run wild when you offer your rats toys. Give them jingle balls made for ferrets and cats, plastic tubes to run through, bird toys, paper towel or toilet paper tubes, empty

boxes, ropes, plastic chains, and more. You can even set up a play pen and offer your rats children's toys, such as plastic cars or doll houses. Just make sure you monitor all play. When rats start to tear up their toys, replace them with new toys. While these toys are generally safe, small plastic pieces that have been chewed off can be harmful if ingested.

Will my rats need a veterinarian?

There is no way to say if your rats will actually need to see a veterinarian, but it is very important to make sure you have a veterinarian available to see your rats should the need arise. Rats do tend to be prone to some medical conditions, such as respiratory infections, tumors, and abscesses. Not every rat will get sick, but many do. It is inhumane to deny a rat medical care. Before bringing home your new rats, make sure you have called all the vets in your area and know which ones are willing to and have experience treating rats. Do not wait to do this until your rats are sick, or it might be too late. When you bring home your new rats, you can take them to your veterinarian for a "wellness exam" and to get better acquainted with the veterinarian. Unlike dogs and cats, rats do not need yearly vaccinations, but you can take your rats in for a yearly "wellness exam". This yearly exam can also help you develop a better relationship with your veterinarian.