



Rat New Owner Guide



Written & Compiled by
AWLQ Education Division
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INTRODUCTION

Pet rats (also known as fancy rats) are a domesticated breed of *Rattus norvegicus*. Bred as pets since the late 19th century, pet rats can be trained to use a litter box, come when called, and perform a variety of tricks. They are clean, sociable, playful and intelligent animals that love human company and attention when properly looked after. They have as little in common with their wild relatives as the average family dog does his cousin the wolf. Well kept rats will live about 2 to 3 years, although the oldest rat on record is said to have lived over 7 years. In short rats make ideal pets for almost anyone and rat care is easy with a little knowledge.

In this guide, you will learn about feeding, grooming, handling and housing your rats, as well as how to provide a healthy diet and what signals to look for to let you know they may be unwell. The goal of this guide is to allow you to have a fulfilling and enjoyable relationship with your pet rats and to ensure that they never come to be in the same sad situation that caused them to be with us here at the AWLQ in the first place.

If ever you find that you can no longer give your ratties the care they need; PLEASE return them to the Animal Welfare League Queensland – WE WILL ALWAYS TAKE THEM BACK!



Questions?

If you have any questions or problems with your new family member, please contact the AWLQ Education Division for advice and referrals.

Ph: (07) 5509 9034

HOUSING

You need to be well prepared for the arrival of your rats. There are a number of things to think about. For example, where will you keep your ratties? What sort of cage will you provide for them? Do you have all of the necessary bedding, food, water, hiding places and toys for your rats health and comfort?

CAGE AND PLACEMENT

Cages such as the one pictured below, make the best housing for rats:

- They provide good ventilation
- They're an excellent climbing-frame.
- Your rats can see, hear and smell the world and in particular keep an eye on you.
- You can interact with your rats through the bars.

However, wire floors should never be left uncovered. Wire flooring can trap feet and also cause a condition called Bumblefoot (ulcerative pododermatitis). Wire floored cages also have ammonia levels many times higher than cages with a solid floor plus litter. Excessive ammonia can cause respiratory problems in your rats

Ideally the enclosure provides your rats with security, ventilation and an ideal temperature – warm in winter and cool in summer. Also consider that the larger the cage, the more likely it is to stay clean and tidy as your rats will have more room to play and live



HELPFUL HINT

Remember that the larger the cage, the more likely it is to stay clean and tidy. Your rats will have more room to play and live and their litter tray and food bowls can be kept well away from each other.

BEDDING AND CAGE CLEANING

Bedding is what you lay on the bottom of the cage. Rat bedding is important not only for your rat's comfort, but also for yours. A good bedding will absorb urine well and keep your pet rat dry and healthy. In general, it's a good idea to line the cage with newspaper and then place the bedding over the top. This helps make the cage easier to clean and protect the bottom of the cage from urine and droppings.

Paper pellets, straw pellets, shredded cardboard and fabric make excellent bedding. Shredded paper is also acceptable but care should be taken as some inks can be toxic.

Cedar or pine bedding, cat litter (especially clumping) and corn cob bedding is not recommended. Wood can let off fumes and if eaten, which is highly likely, may contain toxins. Clumping litter can cause clumps and blockages in the stomach and intestines of your rat, resulting in a critically ill animal (non-clumping is better but still not advisable). Corn cob bedding can cause issues when swallowed and tends to get moldy when it gets damp.

Keep in mind that even the best bedding needs to be changed regularly. A daily change of bedding is recommended – yes it's a little extra work but it means that your rats aren't wallowing in their own filth and it also means that particles of rat feces and urine aren't wafting through your home for days on end. However, if your rats are litter box trained and do not urinate and defecate all over their cage, you might be able to get away with longer intervals between complete cage cleans.

CAGE ACCESSORIES

Rats are adventurous little creatures and love to have a variety of options to choose from when it comes to sleeping. An 'igloo' is always popular, along with hammocks and cubes.



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 rat's life more fun.

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 and hidey boxes.

For a simple homemade treat toy you can put treats 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.

Dunking for peas is another great way to make your rat think and work for their treats

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 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 digging material. This can be anything from a bag of sterile potting soil to shredded paper. If using soil make sure it has no fertilizers or other additives.

Assorted rocks and a PVC tunnel partially buried create an even more interesting environment. For fun, and to

add enrichment, hide treats in the digging box for your rat.

Never use straw or hay etc for these boxes as the dust can cause and/or aggravate any breathing problems

DIET

Nutrition is the basis for maintaining good health in your rat, and a good base diet that contains essential nutrients, vitamins and minerals, along with a variety of fruits, nuts, and vegetables will do just that.

Rats are omnivorous requiring both plant and animal food sources in their diets (much like humans), and specially formulated diets help to meet those nutritional requirements.

FRUIT & VEGETABLES



Vegetables	Fruit	Treats – in moderation
Broccoli	Banana – not green	Popcorn – plain
Carrot	Pears	Yoghurt drops
Cucumber	Apple – no seeds	Yoghurt
Peas	Grapes	Puree Baby food
Kale	Paw Paw	Cheese – not blue
Green beans	Watermelon	Sunflower Seeds
Corn	Kiwi Fruit	Cooked Pasta
Capsicum	Strawberries	Cooked Egg
Pumpkin	Most Berries	
Cauliflower		

Rats will have their individual tastes so don't expect each one to like the same. This is why it is essential to give a wide choice. After time, you will get to know the food your rat likes and dislikes.

These foods are to be avoided totally:

- | | |
|---------------|---------------------|
| Green Bananas | Mango |
| Apple Seeds | Raw Brussel Sprouts |
| Oranges | Artichoke |
| Onion | Rhubarb |
| Red Cabbage | Raw Sweet Potato |



DRY MIX

A good quality kibble is essential for a well balanced diet for your rat. Ensure it is one that allows your rat access to all the grains, vitamins and minerals they require to remain healthy. Vetafarm Rodent Origins (below) is an excellent example.

Providing your rat with two food dishes will help to keep their dry and moist foods separate.



HELPFUL HINT

Rat/mouse mix contains peanuts and sunflower seeds, both of which are very fattening in large quantities.

WATER

Your rats should always have access to fresh water in a bottle attached to the side of the cage, such as the one shown in the illustration. Check the water level daily (also that the ball is loose and allowing water to flow) and replace completely every 2 days. A bowl of water will get tipped and/or become dirty very quickly.



GROOMING

BATHING

Rats don't actually need baths as they groom pretty much all day to keep themselves clean. But there are times you might need to bathe them, such as:

- If they get something yucky on their fur you'd rather they didn't groom off and ingest
- If they sleep in pee soaked bedding and end up stinky
- If it's for medical treatment, like a bath for a skin condition or to treat for parasites
- If they are old or incapacitated and aren't grooming themselves sufficiently
- If it's really hot and you need to cool them down
- If they actually enjoy it... there are actually some rats who do love baths



How to bathe a rat

1. Prepare the area:

- Fill the sink with warm water – just a little warmer than you think, rats have higher body temperatures than us.
- Clear the bench of any clutter and place down a towel for the rat to stand on when wet.
- Have shampoo open and ready - a mild small animal shampoo
- Have a dry towel or two within reach
- Perhaps also a bristle brush for grooming

2. Quickly dunk your rat up to the neck in the water, holding him there until he is wet through. Ensure you keep his head and ears free of water. Let him leap out of the sink onto the towel on the bench



3. Using a small amount of shampoo, lather your rat up using your nails to get down through to the base of the fur. This is also a handy time to clean his tail with a toothbrush (brush towards the tip).

4. Dunk your rat back into the water to remove all trace of the shampoo. Let him leap out onto the towel on the bench

5. Bundle him up in a dry towel and rub rub rub... he'll like this part. A groom with a bristled brush helps to smooth and separate the wet fur and thus dry his coat faster naturally. If it's a cold day, ensure you dry him completely so he doesn't get chilled afterwards. Perhaps use a hairdryer on low setting if he'll tolerate it, or place him in a warm room to dry naturally.

6. Offer treats afterwards as a reward, this can help to development an acceptance of the bath
Some rats do actually enjoy a bath and will swim about in the sink.



Some more bathing tips:

- Work fast - less stress involved for you and your rat.
- It's important not to bathe your rat with shampoo too often as it can remove the natural skin oils, resulting in dry itchy skin. Bathe as often as necessary with water only, and use a mild, natural shampoo only sparingly.
- Speak calmly, soothingly and encouragingly to your rat during the whole process.
- Expect some madness in the cage post bath, especially from your alpha rat. When the shampoo/clean smell takes over from rat smell, your alpha may feel the need to reassert himself by rubbing against and peeing on everything, puffing menacingly and grooming everyone

HEALTHCARE

The best healthcare for your rat is PREVENTATIVE health. This means preventing problems from happening by keeping him on a good, well balanced diet and checking him regularly for abnormal behaviour and or signs of illness, disease or parasites. Keeping a close eye on your rat and giving him quality care, as you would any other member of your pet family, should hopefully help you avoid expensive veterinary bills!

Be sure to establish that your vet has experience treating small animals, as not all vets know a great deal about rats.

COMMON DISEASES

All rats carry **Mycoplasma Pulmonis** (Myco), although many spend their entire life without showing any serious symptoms. Factors that can cause the disease to flare up include stress, a weak immune system and other illnesses.

Symptoms include sneezing, sniffing, lethargy, occasional squinting, laboured breathing, rough hair coat and porphyrin staining (looks like blood) around the eyes and nose. The rat may also tilt or roll its head. If the disease is untreated after the onset of symptoms, it will enter the lungs and eventually be fatal.



If your rat displays some or all of these symptoms, you should take it to a vet as soon as possible. Although Myco cannot be cured, the infection can be

suppressed with antibiotics. Rats can have other respiratory diseases but Myco is by far the most common.

If your rat is scratching, or has scabs, **mites or lice** are the prime suspects. It is also possible, although less common that the scabs have been caused by fighting (assuming the rat shares a cage). You should start treating any scratch marks and scabs as caused by mites unless you have reason to think they have been inflicted during fighting. Mites or lice are best treated with Ivermectin, from your vet. You will want to make sure the vet knows what he/she is doing as an overdose will be fatal to the rat.



Protein allergy can be another cause of scabs. This may cause scabs under the chin and around the face. Reducing protein in the affected rat's diet will help if this is the cause.

Bumblefoot will initially present as small red bumps that resemble calluses. The bumps may become large and intermittently bleed and scab over. This can lead to chronic inflammation and abscesses.



Typically, bumblefoot starts as a wound that becomes infected. The first stage of treatment for bumblefoot is a combination of antibiotics combined with cleaning and treatment of the wounds. If the lesions do not respond, surgery may be needed. However this does not always work. The best defence is to inspect your rats' feet regularly for early signs and keep their cage clean.

RAT INTRODUCTIONS

When you introduce rats, do it on neutral ground. Existing rats will vigorously defend their territory if you put a new rat straight into their cage or find it where they are used to playing. A bathtub might be a good place. Reducing or masking scent will help make things easier. Put a small drop of a smelly (but harmless) substance such as vanilla essence on each rat. Bathing

the rats can be a good way to reduce scent, however, if the rats do not like baths then you risk causing more stress.

During the initial introduction you should physically supervise the rats. If things go well you can leave them together on the neutral territory for up to a few hours (providing food, water and somewhere comfortable to sleep. You may need to repeat this step a few times, or keep the sessions shorter if introductions are more fraught.

Once you are confident that the rats will accept each other on neutral ground it is time to get them together in their permanent home. Prepare the cage by thoroughly washing it and all the accessories etc to remove the scent of the existing rat. Make sure you put in new bedding, food and water. Changing the contents round can also help. The idea is to reduce the cues that trigger the existing rat to defend its territory. If the rats do not get on in the cage then go back to the neutral ground stage and repeat as necessary.



Sadly a few rats will not accept newcomers, so in a small number of cases no amount of work will produce a positive outcome.

Remember -

- Expect some amount of scuffling during introductions: squeaking, chasing, nipping, power grooming (where one rat pins the other down and grooms his belly or sniffs his butt), standing up and staring at each other, boxing, etc. As long as no one gets seriously hurt (i.e. blood) then it's better to leave them to sort out their social structure. Soon enough they'll be curled up together in the communal hammock.
- Watch out for the signs of serious aggression: puffed up fur, sidling up to the other rat (to appear larger), biting and hissing. Also look for signs that the new or submissive rat might be scared or being injured, like screeching or screaming and cowering. If this happens, have a towel or heavy gloves ready.
- Introducing adult males to each other is the hardest scenario. Be very careful to introduce them properly and make absolutely sure they accept each other before leaving them together in a cage. This is the scenario with the highest chance of failure.
- Adult rats will usually accept babies over 6 weeks. However adults will sometimes attack babies. If they do, remove the baby for its safety and wait until it is a little older before trying again



RAT REPRODUCTION

Allowing your rats to reproduce is not only unethical - it can be dangerous for the birthing female. However, many people still end up with unplanned baby rats! Rats can reach sexual maturity at 5 weeks of age, so the sexes should be separated prior to this age. They do not recognize incest, so brothers and sisters and even mothers and sons must be separated.

Rats do not have a breeding season, although very hot or cold temperatures will reduce breeding. Females of breeding age come into heat all year-round, every 4 to 5 days, unless they are pregnant, and even then, they may come in heat once or twice early in the pregnancy. Each female usually has a regular schedule that can be marked on the calendar, but it can vary. Each heat usually begins in the evening and lasts most of the night.

GENDER MIXING

While both male and female rats make great pets, you **MUST** know what the gender is of each rat before you buy it. This is of the greatest importance, as you do not want your rats to fight and very importantly, you don't want any unwanted litters!

Two mature males will fight for dominance, so the main thing to remember to avoid putting two mature males together. Even if one or both males have been desexed, they may still fight.

The second thing you want to watch out for is putting a fertile male in with a fertile female. If you want to keep a male and a female together, you must have the male desexed. Keep in mind that it is a far easier operation to have a male desexed than a female.

Perhaps the best and easiest pairing of rats is two young rats, and especially if they are females.

PREGNANCY

If by chance your rat does fall pregnant, or you happen to adopt one that is already pregnant (which is a fairly common occurrence; especially from pet stores), you should take extra care to nurture your expectant mum.

The gestation period is normally 22 days, but can vary from 21 to 23 (and rarely to 26). A postpartum pregnancy will last 28 days. Two weeks into the pregnancy the mother's abdomen will usually start expanding, but not always. As the birth approaches, you may be able to see the pups moving inside her, or feel them if you gently feel her abdomen. Her mammary glands will also start to enlarge two weeks into the pregnancy.

The mother's needs are simple: a nutritious diet, exercise, and extra nesting material a few days before the expected event. Rats will normally have 6-13 pups. If the pregnant female has been living with another female, or a neutered male, it is all right to leave them together during the birth and the raising of the babies, as long as the cage is large enough to allow the mother privacy. Never put a new rat in with a pregnant or nursing female, because she will viciously attack it.

Sometimes a pregnant or nursing rat has a change in personality due to hormone changes. She may become more aggressive, or less interested in playing. In rat society, a mother rat is usually dominant over all other rats, even if she is usually submissive. However, when her job of child rearing is over, the mother will usually regain her former status and personality. It is also common for a nursing mom to have soft stools.



TRAINING YOUR RAT

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.

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, either sights or smells, during training time. Keeping the training area consistent will help to keep the rat's natural instinct to explore new things at bay. Keep your training sessions short- between 10 and 15 minutes and always be positive with your responses.



THE KEY COMPONENTS OF TRAINING

- Trust
- Positive reinforcement
- Consistency
- Repetition
- Patience

SOME TRAINING ACTIVITIES

- Litter Training
- Coming to its name
- Learning the word “No”
- Agility courses
- Retrieving articles
- Standing on hind legs
- Harness & leash training
- Roll-about Ball training
- Obstacle course running
- Clicker training



TWO IMPORTANT TRAINING LESSONS

Recall -

When teaching your rat to come to its name, start with them in their cage. Open the door and call their name, then repeat the word while holding a treat. When they come to you, release the treat to them, praise them verbally and/or reward by giving physical contact such as scratching or by holding them.

Once they are coming to their name, slowly increase the distance between you. It won't be long before they are recalling from where ever they are in the room.

Litter Training -

Training rats to use the litter tray will keep their cage cleaner and the cleaning time down. Most rats will toilet in one area/corner of their cage, and once you have discovered this location place a litter tray there. Place some faeces into the tray to help your rat to recognise this as the 'toilet zone'. It shouldn't take long before they recognize this area and start to use it regularly.



Encouraging them to urinate in the tray is often harder as rats naturally like to mark their areas. However, placing a rock into the litter tray will help with this process as they will mark the 'higher' terrain of the tray and then, hopefully, continue to do so. Learning to use the litter tray for urinating will take longer, due to their natural instincts, but it will happen.

MY RAT NOTES:

Date: Weight: Date: Weight: Date: Weight: Date: Weight:

GENERAL INFORMATION

USEFUL LINKS AND VETS

USEFUL LINKS

BELOW ARE SOME LINKS TO WEBSITES THAT ARE FULL OF USEFUL INFORMATION:

- www.dapper.com.au
- www.ratguide.com
- www.petdirectory.com.au

SMALL ANIMAL SPECIALIST VETS

If your rat needs to see a vet, always check beforehand that the vet you wish to see has knowledge about rat care. Not all vets have small animal experience.

These vets have been recommended to us:

AWLQ Ipswich Community Vet Clinic Tiger St, Ipswich Tel no: (07) 38127533 Dr Karen/Dr Stephanie Shaw	Brisbane Bird & Exotics 191 Cornwall St, Greenslopes Tel no: (07) 32173533 Dr Deborah Monks
Gold Coast Vet Surgery 2800 Gold Coast Highway, Surfers Paradise Tel no: (07) 55385909 Dr Kevin Cruickshank	Hinterland Veterinary Surgery 21 Station Rd, Nerang Tel no: (07) 55781099 Dr Ross Polst