



Rat

Rats make amicable house pets, and a rat raised in a caring environment will be friendly and responsive to his owners, much like a cat or dog. In this way rats are unique among their small-pet counterparts: they learn to like humans and to crave human company. You will need to spend more time with your rat than you would with another small pet, but you will reap the rewards of this friendly interaction. Before you invite any animal into your home, you must be sure that you already have the basic equipment you need to house him safely and adequately. Rats are social creatures and prefer to live with at least one cage mate, but make sure that the person who sells you your pets checks the rats' sexes to avoid unwanted offspring. A 15-gallon aquarium or a wire cage that's at least two feet square is adequate for a pair of rats. Get something larger if you have the space in your house or apartment. Rats are active and need space to climb and exercise in their cages.

Get a solid bottom cage to avoid problems with broken or injured toes (a rat can step through a wire mesh any larger than one-half inch square). Cover the bottom of the cage with phenol-free shavings. Cedar and pine shavings smell good to humans but can cause damage to a rat's lungs, so choose aspen or hardwood chips to line the floor of your pet's cage. You can also buy cage pellets made from recycled paper, but they are usually more expensive than the wood shavings. Your rat might also like to nest in clean rags or torn paper. There are now some pine shavings that have been treated to reduce the aromatic oils. These products may be safe to use with your rat.

Get a sturdy ceramic bowl for your pets' food. His water should come from a water bottle mounted on the side of his cage, because he will likely spill water served in a bowl, or kick shavings into it.

You will need to clean your rats' cage at least once a week. Completely remove all bedding and wipe down the walls and floor of the cage, then allow it to dry completely before you put your rats back into it.

Always provide your rat with toys in his cage. These need not be pet-store purchases. You can find interesting objects for your rats to chew and climb around your home. Cardboard

boxes and tubes, clay flowerpots, pieces of rope and other objects can become playthings. Just remember that your rat is a rodent and will gnaw on all of the objects you place in his home. Don't give him anything with small parts that could break off in his mouth and hurt him, and don't allow him to chew on plastic-coated or painted toys. Much like many humans, rats are prone to bad eating habits. They will eat for the sake of eating, and thus are vulnerable to weight gain if they are not fed the right kinds of food. As much as your pet will enjoy salty and fatty snacks from your table, you must resist the urge to share each meal with him. While a little variety is good for any creature, your rat can easily fill up on unhealthy foods and forgo those that provide him the basic nutrition he needs for healthy living.

Rodents can consume about 10 percent of their body weight in food every day. Rats are omnivorous, which means they will eat both plant and animal fodder. The standard rat fare is a lab block feed, which you can buy at your local pet store. This kibble is a good source of nutrients and will also wear down your rats' teeth. You can also give your rat green leafy vegetables (good sources of vitamins) and some fruit, though the staple of their diets should be some sort of pellet food. Grains are also good food for rats: give them bran, corn, uncooked oatmeal, rice and wheat; do not give them sweetened cereals.

Try giving your rat a sturdy piece of bone with a little bit of meat still on it (from beef or pork, nothing splintery like a chicken bone). Chewing on the bone will help him to wear down his ever-growing incisor teeth, and both the meat and the bone marrow are good protein sources for him. Your rat's teeth are strong enough to open up hard-shelled nuts and cracked corn, so you can try those, too.

Remember, your rat is not capable of vomiting or burping, so you must never give him carbonated beverages. Sticky foods, like peanut butter off a spoon, toffees, or fruit candies, can also get your rat into trouble. Playtime is a great time to get to know your rat. You will find him innately intelligent and capable of recognizing you and the other people in your household. He will enjoy spending time climbing on you – going through your pockets or just perching on your shoulder and checking out the view.

Be sure to rat proof the room where you intend to play with your pet, covering up all small holes and places where he could get behind furniture or into walls. Lift all electrical cords off the floors to avoid undesired chewing. And never leave your pet alone in a room with a larger animal (cat, dog, or small child), no matter how friendly they seem towards each other when you are around.

A rat's innate intelligence makes him a natural for learning tricks. Try to think of tricks that are an extension of your rat's natural behavior. For example, a rat can easily pick up and carry an object back to his nest. So it is possible for you to teach him to "fetch." If you want to teach him the game, start by throwing a small wad of paper towards him and saying "fetch." Remember: Rats are incremental learners, so begin by rewarding your rat each time he takes one incremental step towards a trick goal. If he sniffs the piece of paper, give him a small, low-calorie treat, like a piece of crisp rice. Repeat this until he seems to understand that going towards the thrown ball is expected. The next step is to reward him

only if he goes to the ball and picks it up in his mouth. Then only reward him if he picks up the ball and moves it towards you. And so on. Remember to keep your training sessions short; a rat's attention span is even shorter than a small child's attention span.

Always use positive reinforcement to teach your small pet a trick; never strike or reproach them for doing something "wrong." Also know that, like dogs, rats respond best to simple one-word phrases, like "fetch" instead of "fetch the ball."