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HOUSING

CAGE

Specs

Cages must be a minimum of 2 cubic feet per rat. Taller cages with levels are preferred. Bar spacing should be no more than 1" for adult rats and 0.5" for young rats.

Temperature

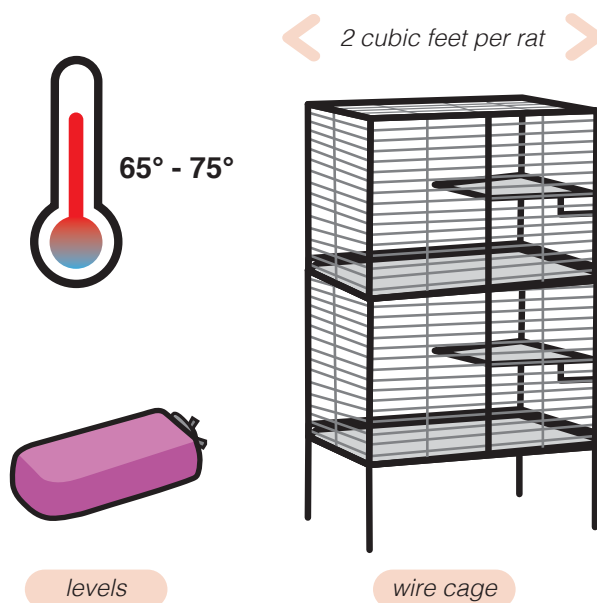
The temperature inside the cage should always be between 65° and 75° F with the humidity between 30% and 70%.

Material

Wire-sided cages are preferable because they provide plenty of ventilation and options for climbing. All cage floors, ramps, and levels should be solid or covered with fleece since standing on wire can cause injuries and bumblefoot.

Examples

Rat Manor cages are good for 1 - 3 rats and have several levels for them to play on. Critter Nation cages are easy to clean, customize, and move around. Plus, they come in both single and double sizes depending on how much room you have and how many rats you want to keep.



BEDDING

Sometimes bedding that works for one rat will not work for another as some rats have allergies to certain beddings. MNPPR strongly recommends avoiding all wood-based beddings due to the general sensitivity of pocket pets. We like to use fleece to line the cage and cover any exposed wire floors, then use *unscented* paper bedding as litter placed in a litter box. When the fleece is soiled, simply throw it in the wash and replace it as needed. Most rats can be trained to use a litter box, which can make cleaning even easier.



fleece



pelleted paper



soft recycled paper



shredded paper



HOUSING

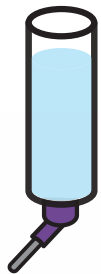
FURNISHINGS

Essentials

Set your rat's cage up with the primary essentials, including a water bottle, food bowl, lots of chew toys (wood or lava), a wheel, nesting material, and at least one shelter/hide. Some rats enjoy running on wheels, others do not. Be sure to provide one of the appropriate size and material. Learn more about wheels in the exercise section of this handbook. Some people choose to litter train their rats. If you do, be sure to incorporate at least one litter box that is large enough for your pet to sit in comfortably.

Variety

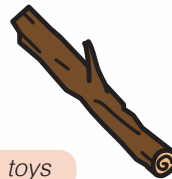
It is important to have a variety of toys, beds, and fun items you can rotate to keep your rat interested. Good examples include toilet paper tubes, fiddlesticks, tunnels, bird toys, bits of fabric, ladders, cardboard, and treat balls. Visit the homemade toys tab on our website for more ideas.



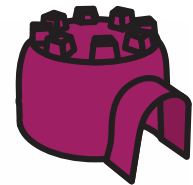
water bottle



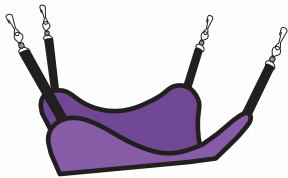
food dish



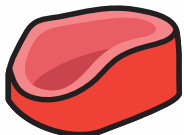
toys



hides



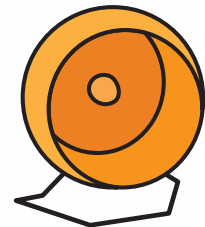
hammocks



beds



litter box



wheel



FEEDING

DIET

Staple Diet

Always keep your rat's food bowl full of high-quality rat/mouse kibble, pellets, or blocks such as Oxbow or Mazuri. Seed mix food should not be used because they are often missing vital nutrients and many rats will only eat their favorite tasting pieces causing an unbalanced diet. If your rat is overweight they may need fewer treats or more exercise.

Treats

There are many options for store-bought treats made for rats, but fresh food can also make great treats. Be sure they are not storing anything in their nests that could rot. Rats should never get more than 1 tablespoon of treats a day or they may become obese.

SAFE TREATS

apples
bananas
bell peppers
blueberries
broccoli
carrots
cauliflower
Cheerios
cranberries
cucumbers
cooked eggs
green beans
mealworms
parsley
peas
pumpkin seeds
plain popcorn
raspberries
sunflower seeds
timothy hay
yogurt

UNSAFE TREATS

any citrus fruit
apple seeds
cabbage
cheese
corn
fizzy drinks
garlic
milk
onions
peanuts
poppy seeds
raisins
raw beans
raw meat
rhubarb
walnuts



EXERCISE

Activity

Rats are naturally nocturnal but can easily adapt to their humans' schedule if you set a routine and stick to it every day. Young rats are more active and playful than older animals. As they age, most are content to explore for a little then spend time cuddling in your lap. Female rats are generally more energetic and independent, while males tend to be more lazy and snuggly.

Play

Some fun things to try with your rat are making a maze, playing chase with a toy, creating an obstacle course, wrestling with your hand, and hiding food for them to find. Rats should get a minimum of one hour per day of playtime with you outside their cage, even if they have a very large habitat or a wheel in their cage. Unless your rat is used to you and easily lets you pick it up, make sure to only let your rat out in areas where they are easy to catch like on your bed or in a chair. Start by letting them run around on your hands, arms, and lap before giving them more space in a rat-proof area.

Wheels

Any wheel should have a solid base and be of the appropriate size for your rat. Never use wire or mesh wheels since tails, toes, and other body parts can get stuck in the mesh or bars and cause serious injuries.

Exercise Balls

Do not use an exercise ball for your rat.

Pet-Proofing

Make sure to rat-proof before play by covering outlets and cords, putting away anything you don't want chewed on, moving houseplants, blocking any small space you cannot reach into such as under the fridge, and securing other pets in a different area or room.



SOCIAL NEEDS

COMPANIONSHIP

Mental Stimulation

Rats are very social, smart animals with lots of energy. They love spending time with their humans, playing games, and solving problems.

Bonded Buddies

Rats are communal animals and will be happiest when living with other rats. It is strongly recommended to keep a minimum of two rats at a time. Unaltered rats should be kept only with other rats of the same sex.

BONDING WITH YOUR RAT

Key Components of Training

**TRUST · POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT
CONSISTENCY · REPETITION · PATIENCE**

Tips

Every time you approach your rat's habitat, bring a small treat for your pet so they learn to associate you with pleasant things and look forward to your visits. Offer treats with an open palm when possible.

Speak softly to your rat and call them by their name so they get used to your voice and learn their name.

Keep your rat's cage somewhere you spend a lot of time so they get used to your voice, scent, and movement.

Rats have incredibly poor eyesight and some will bob their heads back and forth to better see what's around them. If your rat does this, give them extra time to feel secure. When approaching your rat to touch them, first place your hand about 5 inches from their eyes so they can see you properly.

The more time you spend with your rat, the sooner they will become comfortable with you.



HANDLING & GROOMING

SAFE HANDLING

Picking Up Your Rat

Waiting for your pet to come to you before picking them up is a great way to develop trust. Talk to your rat and let them sniff your hand before attempting to pick them up so they know it's you. To teach your rat to feel secure while being held, place a treat in the palm of your hand and rest it flat, palm up on the floor of the cage without moving for as long as you are able. When your pet feels comfortable, they will come to sniff your hand and climb onto your palm to take the treat. Once your rat is comfortable being on your hand, you can take them out to play. Hold them close to your body and speak softly to comfort them. If your pet is new or too nervous to climb into your hand, utilize a small bed or box using the transport box method. Never pick a rat up by the tail.

GROOMING

Nails

Rat nails wear down naturally if you provide toys and levels that have rough surfaces for them to climb on such as lava ledges or bricks. Occasionally, they may need their nails trimmed. To do so, hold the rat still, cover the toe with your finger so only the nail is exposed, and use pet nail trimmers to clip the clear part of the nail. If you accidentally clip the pink vein (or quick) dip your pet's foot in styptic powder to stop the bleeding. It can be helpful to have a second person holding the animal, to give them treats, and to keep sessions short. Alternatively, view our events page on our website for our nail trim clinic dates and we can do it for you!

Dental Care

You do not need to brush your rat's teeth. Provide plenty of chew toys so they can wear down their teeth naturally. Check your rat's teeth regularly to make sure they are not overgrown or misaligned. Take them to the vet if symptoms of dental issues present themselves so they can be trimmed by a professional.

Bathing and Brushing

Rats are naturally very clean animals and unless they are ill, injured, or kept in a dirty environment, they should not need bathing. If something happens and they do get extra dirty or are not cleaning themselves, only use kitten or small pet shampoo. If your older rat is having trouble grooming, you can use a warm, damp cloth to help them. Make sure they are completely dry afterward so they don't get cold. They should not need to be brushed, but if your rat's fur is tangled or debris is stuck in it a clean toothbrush can be used.



HEALTH

GENERAL INFORMATION

Lifespan

Rats live an average of 2 to 3 years.

Reproduction

Rats can reproduce by 4 weeks old. It is recommended to have female rats spayed while they are between the ages of 4 and 6 months. This reduces the risk of mammary and pituitary tumors as well as certain types of cancer. Male rats can be neutered and although there are not significant health benefits, it can sometimes help curb aggressive or dominant behavior. If you choose not to spay or neuter your rats, you must house only rats of the same sex together to ensure companionship and prevent breeding.

Routine At Home Health Checks

At least once a week, spend some time examining your pet's fur, skin, and teeth for any physical changes such as lumps, wounds, overgrown teeth or nails, poor coat quality, etc. If any abnormalities are found, it is a good idea to make an appointment with your veterinarian for assessment, as any health concerns can progress very quickly.

Annual Exam

All rats should be given a yearly veterinary exam to ensure they stay in good health. Rats do not require any vaccines.

SIGNS OF ILLNESS

Like all pocket pets, rats are very good at hiding when they get sick so if you see any of the following signs get in contact with your veterinarian immediately:

ANY BEHAVIORAL CHANGE

DISINTEREST IN INTERACTION

CHANGES IN GROOMING

LETHARGY

OVERGROWN TEETH

DISINTEREST IN TREATS

DEFENSIVE AGGRESSION

CHANGES IN EATING/DRINKING

POOR COAT QUALITY



HEALTH

COMMON ILLNESSES

Upper Respiratory Infection

Most rats carry a bacteria called mycoplasma that causes upper respiratory infections. Some rats may never show any symptoms while others will have infections on and off throughout their lives, often brought on by periods of stress. If a rat shows symptoms of a URI, it should be taken to the vet as soon as possible for treatment before it develops into pneumonia. **See our guide on URI in rats for more information.** *Symptoms include sneezing, labored breathing, chattering, sniffing, eye and nose discharge, weight loss, lack of appetite, and lethargy.*

Dental Problems

Because a rat's teeth continuously grow throughout its life, they must be constantly worn down by grazing hay and nibbling chew toys. If a rat does not have the correct diet or if their teeth are not properly lined up, they can grow out of control causing pain, abscess, difficulty eating, GI status, and eventually death. This is called malocclusion and can require x-rays, tooth filing, or abscess removal under anesthesia. *Symptoms include drool or saliva build-up on their face, bad breath, decreased appetite, weight loss, lumps on their face, and change in bathroom habits.*

Skin Conditions

Rats are prone to a range of skin problems that can be uncomfortable and cause infections. The most common causes are mites, ringworm, or allergies. Allergies can be treated with medications or by changing their bedding, food, or cleaning detergent. If none of these conditions are found, the rat could have a behavioral condition that's causing them to barber themselves (overgroom). *Symptoms include excessive scratching and sores on the skin (particularly around the shoulders, neck, and ears).*

Tumors

As they age most rats are vulnerable to developing tumors. These growths are usually benign but may impede a rat's movement or quality of life as they grow larger. It is possible to surgically remove most tumors, but the stress and anesthetic can be risky so speak with your vet about what the best option is for your pet. There may come a time when a tumor prevents a rat from eating, drinking, or moving around and humane euthanasia might need to be considered. *Symptoms include a new growth or bump anywhere on a rat's body, changes in eating habits, or changes in behavior.*



BEHAVIOR

All rats sound and act a little differently. Only by spending time with them will you fully be able to understand them. Below is a general guide of their communication to get you started.

VOCALIZATION

BEHAVIOR	DESCRIPTION	MEANING
Squeaking	Loud squeaking.	<i>Surprise, protest to being disturbed, or in pain.</i>
Bruxing	Grinding or clicking teeth; possibly with eyes boggling.	<i>Happiness, a rat purr.</i>
Peeping	Soft “peep” sounds.	<i>Happy while grooming.</i>
Hissing	Puffing up, hissing.	<i>Anger, defense, possibly a warning before biting.</i>
Grunting	Similar to a human grunting noise.	<i>Excitement.</i>

BODY LANGUAGE

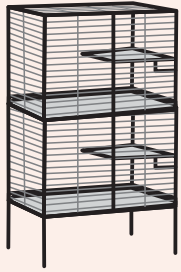
BEHAVIOR	DESCRIPTION	MEANING
Head Swaying	Swinging or bobbing head back and forth.	<i>Rats have poor eyesight and will use this movement to create better depth perception. Red and pink eyed rats are more susceptible to this.</i>
Popcorning	Hopping, bouncing, leaping and running.	<i>Happy and having fun.</i>
Grooming	Licking.	<i>Friendship and love between two rats or a rat and their human.</i>
Tail Wagging	Tail moving back and forth like a dog’s.	<i>Nervous, stressed, afraid, possibly about to attack.</i>
Shoving	Pushing a human or another rat with its front paws.	<i>“Stop it!” or “Go away!”</i>
Helicopter Tail	Swinging the tail around like a helicopter’s blades.	<i>Does not feel steady and is using the tail to try and get better balance.</i>
Freezing	Suddenly stopping and holding still.	<i>Startled or frightened.</i>
Urine Trails	Droplets of urine left behind while walking.	<i>A dominant rat marking its territory.</i>



RAT SUPPLY CHECKLIST

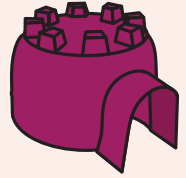
CAGE

2 cubic feet per rat minimum.



SHELTER

Igloos, grass huts, cardboard boxes, etc.



CHEW TOYS

Wood, lava, etc.



WATER BOTTLE



FOOD DISH

Ceramic is best to prevent chewing.



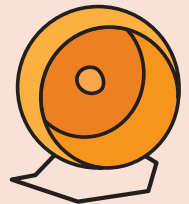
FOOD

MNPPR recommends Oxbow. Do not give your rat foods with corn as the main ingredient or foods with mix-ins.



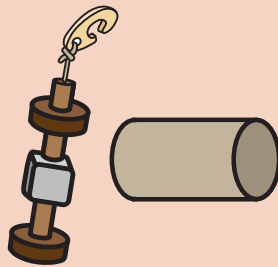
WHEEL

Solid base only. No wire, bars, or mesh.



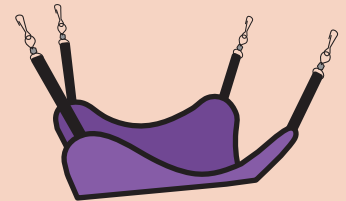
ENRICHMENT

Rats are busybodies! Be sure to provide them with lots of fun toys. Check out our homemade toys page for ideas.



HAMMOCKS

Rats love hammocks! Provide at least 3.



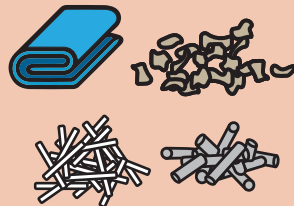
BED

Monitor for chewing.



BEDDING

Fleece, soft recycled paper (CareFresh), shredded paper, paper pellets. Only use *unscented* paper litter.



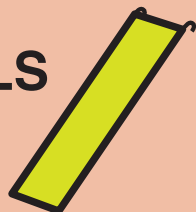
LITTER BOX

Be sure to use a different type of litter in the box than the rest of the habitat.

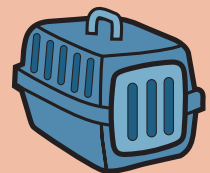


RAMPS & LEVELS

Provide more space in your pet's habitat by adding ramps and levels.



PET CARRIER



DISCLAIMER AND CREDITS

DISCLAIMER

All information shared by MN Pocket Pet Rescue is researched, up to date, and accurate to the best of our ability. We are not a licensed veterinary organization and do not intend to present ourselves as such. All educational material contains our best recommendations for care specific to each species. However, all animals are different and some may have unique needs. MN Pocket Pet Rescue does not assume any liability for the well-being of any animal not under our care. Always use your best judgment and follow veterinary recommendations whenever necessary. If you have any questions or find inaccurate information please contact us.

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