



**Cat Care of Fayette**  
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Pet's Name

# Your Pet Rat



**Also known as:** Domestic rat (a descendant of the wild brown rat)

**Weight:** Males, 1 to 1½ ; Females ½ -1 pound

**Length:** 14-18 inches, including tail

**Lifespan:** 2-4 years

**Cost per Year:** Approximately \$300

**As a Children's Pet:** Great with kids ages 5 and up, but young caretakers should be supervised by an adult.

**Fun Fact:** Rats love people, and will be happy to spend the day riding on your shoulder!

**Background:** The domestic rat is a descendant of the wild brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) and has been bred as a pet for about a hundred years. Pet rats are much less fearful than their wild cousins, and when handled gently, they quickly learn to enjoy riding on their human friends' shoulders and napping in their laps.

The average rat ranges from 14 to 18 inches long, including the seven-inch tail. These companion rodents come in a variety of coat types and colors, from curly and shiny to black, white and black-and-white. If well cared for, rats typically live 2 1/2 to three years.

Curious, intelligent and always up for some fun, rats can be great pets for kids—but young caretakers should always be supervised by an adult. These animals are not toys, and must be treated with kindness and respect.



## Rat Supply Checklist

- Wire, solid-bottom cage or multi-level ferret cage – paper-based bedding
- Small boxes or plastic pet igloos
- Tree branch for climbing
- Exercise wheel (solid, no rungs)
- PVC tubes for tunneling
- Rodent chow, block or pellet form
- Attachable water bottle with drinking tub
- Unpainted, untreated piece of wood, dog biscuits or safe chew toy for dental health
- Safe and rodent-appropriate toys, including swings, ropes and other toys made for parrots.

## Housing

Rats are very social with members of their own kind, and should be kept in pairs at minimum. Baby rats can be removed from their litters at about six weeks of age. A pair of females is recommended for first-time rat caretakers. Males can do well together if introduced when they are young and neutered. Females, on the other hand, are more accepting of new friends introduced later in life.

Note that a neutered male can live with females, or a spayed female can live with males. Do not keep intact males and females together, as they will breed—and breed. The average rat litter is 12 young, and can be as high as 20.

Rats do best in wire cages with a solid bottom because they enjoy climbing, and the wire offers good ventilation. A cage that is 2' x 2' x 2' will generally do for a pair of rats, but a larger space would be much appreciated. If you plan to keep more than that, you'll need a larger cage. The floor should be solid, and a paper bedding must be provided. Do not use pine or cedar shavings, which can be harmful to your pets. If you find that your rats like to make nests, provide shredded paper towels or napkins for this purpose.

A large, multi-level cage designed for ferrets can also make a great rat home. Whatever type of cage you choose, don't forget the furniture! Provide small boxes or plastic igloos to hide in (it's very necessary for your rats to have a quiet place to which they can retreat) and PVC tubes for your rats to run through. You can also add a tree branch for them to climb on. Some rats enjoy running on an exercise wheel, so you may want to get yours one. Make sure that the wheel has a solid surface without wire rungs, so their tails cannot get caught while running.

Keep in mind that a bored rat is an unhappy rat, and it's up to you to provide the fun and games for your little guys. They LOVE toys, and you can offer yours many of the same toys that are enjoyed by parrots, including swings and ropes for climbing.

Rats can be prone to colds, so be sure to keep the cage out of drafts. Intense direct sunlight should also be avoided, as rats are highly susceptible to heatstroke. A room kept at 60 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit should be just right. Make sure the cage is easily accessible for clean-up by placing it away from the wall. (And P.S., it's especially great if you can find a location where the family gathers in the early evening—your gregarious pets will love it!)

## Diet

Your pets' main diet should consist of rat blocks, a high-quality pellet chow formulated for rodents. Look for a brand that lists soy meal as the main ingredient. This food should be available at all times.

It is a good idea to offer small amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables to your rats every day. Peas, broccoli, carrots, apples and bananas are good foods to start with, but it's fun to try new things and find out your pets' favorites. Rats love people food, and you can give yours the occasional table scrap, such as cooked pasta, small pieces of egg or chicken, or a bit of pizza crust. Treats need to be limited to prevent obesity.

**Do not** give your rats chocolate, corn, candy, caffeinated and carbonated beverages, onions, sticky foods such as taffy and peanut butter, and junk food.



Fresh, clean water should be available at all times. A water bottle with a drinking tube that attaches to the side of the cage is the best way to go.

## General Care

Remove droppings, uneaten food and soiled areas of bedding from your pets' cage every day. Clean the cage completely once a week by replacing dirty bedding and scrubbing down the rest of the cage with warm, soapy water.

Like that of all rodents, a rat's front teeth grow continuously. Provide unpainted, untreated pieces of wood, dog biscuits or safe cardboard or rawhide chew toys for your rats to gnaw on. This is crucial for keeping their teeth in tip-top condition and preventing dental problems.

Rats are friendly and curious by nature, but you'll need to get your pets used to you—and used to being handled. Start by feeding them small treats. When they're comfortable with that, you can pick them up, one hand supporting the bottom, the other over the back. When you get to know each other better, don't be surprised if your little friends want to snuggle and be petted.

Once your rats are hand-tamed, you should let them play outside of the cage in a safe, secure area for an hour or so every day. Play pens can be purchased and provide a safe play area for your pet. This out-of-cage playtime is mandatory—and will keep your smart, active friends mentally stimulated and physically fit. Just be sure to supervise at all times, please.

## Veterinary Care

If you think one of your rats is sick, don't wait until your regularly scheduled bi-annual check-up—seek medical attention immediately. Common signs that something isn't right with your rat include sneezing, lethargy, weight loss, dull eyes, diarrhea and difficulty breathing. Rats are particularly susceptible respiratory infections and to external parasites such as mites. If you think your animal is infested, a trip to the vet is in order to clear up the infestation.

A checkup every six months is recommended for your pet rat. Rats age more quickly than we do and a few months can make a big difference in their health. The veterinarian will examine your rat's teeth, weight and overall health; problems found early are more likely to be treatable, so don't wait!

