

Common Rat Ailments

The best advice is to consult your vet if you think your rat may be ill.

A sick rat may well be lethargic and found hunched up in the cage; its coat may appear messy and unkempt; there might be a lack of interest in food or laboured breathing. If you see any symptoms that worry you, the rat should be put in a separate cage from the others to prevent contagion.

Head-tilt: This can be caused by an inner ear infection and the rat may walk in circles while holding its head to one side. Seek urgent veterinary attention.

Respiratory infection: Symptoms can include uneven breathing, sneezing and nasal discharge. Consult a vet as soon as possible.

Skin sores: These can be caused by excessive scratching or by parasites. Bathe them with a mild antiseptic, and if they persist seek the advice of a vet.

Tumours: Older rats are more prone to tumours, especially non-breeding females or rats that are fed a high-fat diet. If you notice any lumps or growths consult a vet urgently.

Overgrown teeth: This can be avoided by giving your rats wood and raw vegetables to gnaw on. A vet will be able to trim overgrown teeth.



Rat Facts

In the wild rats live in tightly-bound colonies and are therefore happiest when kept in groups. As rats are very intelligent they need stimulation, and you need to be prepared to spend at least an hour a day with them, playing and petting. Male rats are known as 'bucks' and females as 'does'.

Gestation:
21-28 days

Litter size:
Up to 18 every
3-4 weeks

Maturity:
Bucks: 5-12
weeks
Does: From 3.5
weeks old

**Weaning
age:**
4-5 weeks

**Eyes
open:**
13-16 days
after birth

Weight:
Bucks usually
400-700g,
does around
200-500g

The Environmental Animal Sanctuary & Education (EASE) is a registered charity (no. 1089160) which promotes all aspects of the human/companion animal relationship. Our services include the provision of a Preparing for Pet Loss programme as well as education in animal welfare. For more information about our work, contact:

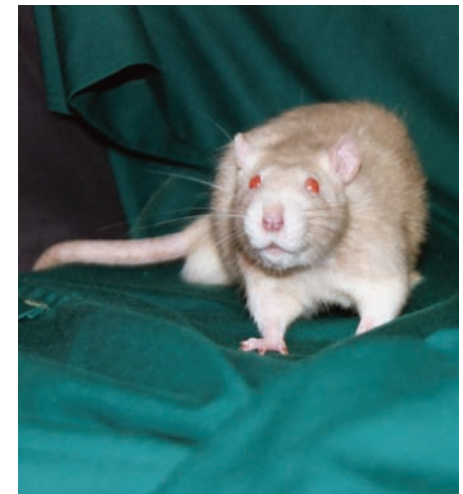
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**Environmental Animal
Sanctuary and
Education**

The EASE Guide to Caring for RATS



Supported by the BVA Animal Welfare Foundation. Committed to improving the welfare of all animals through veterinary science, education and debate.



Rats are social, active and intelligent animals with a life span of 2 to 3 years. They are easy to look after and will need a lot of time and attention, which must be considered in relation to their low purchase and maintenance costs.

A Home for your Rats

Rats need to be kept indoors but out of direct sunlight. The bigger the cage the better; a pair of rats would need a minimum size of 75cm x 30cm x 30cm, and more than one level is preferable.

A wire cage allows air to circulate freely, although the mesh needs to be fairly small to prevent the rat escaping. Wire floors need to be covered to prevent the rats injuring their feet, and plastic sheeting is ideal. Cover this with wood shavings, avoiding cedar, pine and other softwoods as these can contribute to respiratory problems. Soft hay or kitchen paper can be used for bedding inside a nest box which can be made from cardboard; do not use cotton wool or newspaper. The cage must be thoroughly cleaned every week using a mild detergent which is rinsed and dried off.

Toys to play with and ropes and ladders to climb will all help to keep your rats happy and make them fun to watch, as will lengths of pipe to explore and wooden cotton reels to gnaw. Rats also like to have lots of hiding places. The cage should be kept away from electronic equipment, such as computers, as rats communicate via ultrasound and such devices can interfere with their conversations.

Rats should be kept in single sex groups as breeding is not advised due to large litter sizes. Young rats under three weeks of age are easily sexed as the females will have nipples which are absent in the male; after three weeks it is more difficult but the males will have a longer space between the anus and the genitalia. When they have reached sexual maturity the males are obvious by the presence of testicles which the females lack.



Litter Training

Rats can be trained to use a litter tray which will save time when cleaning their cage. Place a tray in the corner of the cage filled with litter. Litter made from pellets of paper is much more absorbent than wood shavings and is better at controlling odour. The litter tray should be cleaned out at least every other day. Whenever you find your rats have been to the toilet elsewhere in the cage, remove the mess and place it in the litter tray.

Food and Drink for your Rats

Rats are omnivorous and will eat a varied diet of mixed grains, raw vegetables, fruit, seeds, nuts and cooked meat in moderation. A salt and mineral block should also be provided. There are a number of commercial rat food mixes available from pet shops.

Food can be served in plastic, metal or ceramic bowls as well as hiding it in boxes, food dispensing toys or simply scattering it on the floor of the cage, making sure it is eaten or cleared away before it goes off. Clean, fresh drinking water should always be available from a drip-feed bottle that is regularly cleaned and filled.



Handling Your Rats

To get your rats used to you, begin by offering them food from your hand. Once you can handle them, keep doing so regularly so that they remain tame.

Rats are picked up by placing one hand around the shoulders and using your other hand to support its hindquarters. They may bite if alarmed, so always be as gentle as possible.

Rats

Most pet rats today are descended from the brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) which arrived in Britain in the 18th century from Asia, largely replacing the black rat (*Rattus rattus*). Brown rats live in colonies in a variety of habitats often near human habitation and, although they are typically nocturnal, will sometimes forage for food during daylight hours. They will defend their territory against other rats from outside of the colony, and fights will often break out within the colony, the loser being chased off.



Rat Body Language

Bruxing: A soft and repetitive grinding of the incisors. At a high intensity, it also causes the eyeball to vibrate in and out, known as 'eye-boggling'. It seems to be done at times of relaxation and pleasure or to sharpen the teeth.

Hiding: One rat may retreat to a safe area, away from an aggressive rat, and may stay sitting quietly for some time, possibly an hour or so.

Piloerection: The rats' body hair stands on end and occurs when the rat is either cold or stressed.

Shriek: Can be heard during fights or when the rat is in pain or protesting strongly about something.

Barbering: Excessive grooming of a cage-mate or the rat itself in which fur is nibbled off. This can be a sign of stress or mange, and should be checked out by a vet. Provide more things to chew, and possibly reduce the number of rats.