**YVCipedia SMALL MAMMAL**

Rat Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

Domestic rats (*Rattus norvegicus*) are intelligent, social rodents with affectionate personalities and highly trainable behavior. Pet rats live about 2–3 years (up to 4 years with exceptional care) and benefit from bonding with both their human handlers and cage mates. They are crepuscular—most active at dawn and dusk—and enjoy exploration, play, and mental stimulation.

## **Housing & Environment**

Safe, escape-proof housing is crucial for rats. A cage with a solid floor (not wire), multiple levels, and sturdy bars offers space for climbing and nesting. Bedding should be deep, absorbent, and free of pine or cedar to avoid respiratory and skin issues. Proper temperature and humidity control, along with routine cleaning, help prevent respiratory and dermatological problems.

**Housing Highlights:**

* Minimum space: 23 sq in (150 sq cm) per rat, but larger is better
* Cage: wire-sided with solid base; multi-level preferred
* Bedding: 3–4 in deep, paper-based or kiln-dried softwood
* Climate: 65–79 °F; humidity 40–70%
* Cleaning: spot-clean daily; full clean weekly

## **Diet & Nutrition**

As omnivores, rats thrive on a balanced diet of formulated blocks or pellets, supplemented with small amounts of fresh vegetables, fruits, and occasional animal proteins. Avoid seed-heavy mixes and sugary treats. Fresh water should always be available in a bottle or heavy bowl, cleaned daily.

**Diet Summary:**

* Base diet: commercial blocks or pellets, daily
* Supplements: vegetables, fruit, cooked egg or lean meat occasionally
* Avoid: high-fat seed mixes and sugary snacks
* Water: fresh, supplied daily

## **Healthcare**

Early and annual veterinary checkups are essential. Rats are prone to respiratory infections, dental issues, mammary tumors (especially in intact females), and skin conditions. Spaying/neutering can reduce reproductive cancers and aggression. Monitor closely for illness—rats often hide early signs until conditions become serious.

**Health Highlights:**

* Vet visits: initial post-adoption exam, annual checkups recommended
* Watch for: sneezing, labored breathing, weight loss, lumps, overgrown teeth
* Common concerns: respiratory disease, mammary tumors, dental issues, skin mites
* Preventive care: encourage neutering/spaying where appropriate

## **Behavior & Handling**

Rats bond readily with their caretakers and can learn simple commands, tricks, and litter training. Safe handling involves scooping them securely, avoiding tail lifting. Gentle interactions during their active hours help build trust. Avoid sudden noises or handling during deep sleep.

**Behavior Tips:**

* Handling: scoop from underneath; no tail-lifting
* Interaction: aim for 15–30 min supervised daily playtime
* Social needs: keep in same-sex pairs or have spayed/neutered groups
* Signals: chirping, scratching, and audible nasal sounds reflect health and mood

## **Grooming & Enrichment**

Rats groom themselves thoroughly, so baths are rarely needed. Provide chew toys to support dental health and reduce boredom. Rotate toys, climbing structures, and hiding spots. A hammock or cloth hammock can offer a comforting retreat. Keep the cage fresh to maintain a clean environment.

**Enrichment Essentials:**

* Chew toys: wood blocks, ropes, puzzle feeders
* Hide/sleep areas: hammocks, nesting boxes
* Exercise: climbing ladders, mobile play area
* Cleaning: maintain fresh bedding; wash accessories weekly

## **Fun Facts & FAQs**

* Rats can learn to **perform tricks** and navigate mazes—they’re highly intelligent.
* **Porphyrin eye/nose discharge** (“red tears”) may indicate stress or respiratory illness.
* **Tail injuries** can occur if handled poorly—support the body, never grab the tail.
* **Mammary tumors** are common in unspayed females; spaying reduces but does not eliminate this risk.
* Rats rarely bite when handled gently—they form strong social bonds.

### **Supplies Checklist**

* Multilevel cage with solid flooring and wire sides
* 3–4 in deep paper-based or kiln-dried bedding
* Hide boxes, hammocks, ladders, climbing toys
* Commercial rat blocks/pellets and supplement treats
* Chew toys, puzzle feeders
* Heavy food bowl, water bottle
* Carrier for vet visits

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