

A Guide to Caring for Your Pet Rats

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Getting a new pet can be exciting, nerve wracking, and fun all at the same time. About three years ago, I was 18 years old and looking for a fun pet to love while I was a freshman in college. I got two pet rats, Scar and Toph. They are incredibly smart, sweet, and playful. Scar and Toph enjoy going on walks (both outdoors and indoors) and they love to play fetch. They also enjoy snuggling into my arms or on top of

my shoulder when I am watching YouTube videos or a TV show. Having a rat is like having a miniature dog – you get to form the same strong emotional bond and they are just as intelligent, but they require less maintenance. If you are planning on getting a pet rat, here are the basics that you need to know so that you can keep your new furry friends happy and healthy.

Before You Get Your Rats

Socialization:



Rats are extremely social animals, so you need to keep more than one. If you only have one rat, it will become depressed and possibly aggressive (ASPCA). Additionally, you need to set aside time to play with your rats every day. It is recommended that you play with your rats for 2-3 hours every day, however, if you are extremely busy one day, one hour is fine (Blue Cross for Pets). This does not necessarily mean active play time. Play time with rats is just considered the time that they get to socialize while outside of their cage. You could easily get their play time in while you are watching a TV show or working.

When you are getting your pet rats, the easiest way to make sure your rats get along is to find young rats that are already housed together by a breeder or in a pet store. Most places that sell pet rats keep the rats together which allows you to skip the introduction phrase. If you buy two rats that were housed separately, you must take them through the introduction process. This requires two cages and a neutral area. A neutral area could be a bedroom that one has not claimed as their own, a bathroom, a bathtub, or a cage that neither has stayed in without it being cleaned. When you introduce them, you may want some toys or obstacle course items to distract them from each other. The rats will most likely fight, but that is normal. As long as neither rat draws blood, you must let them establish the hierarchy.

Cage Requirements:

Many people think that they can walk into a pet store and choose a cage that has a



Double Critter Nation, \$249.99

picture of a rat on it and everything will be fine. This is completely false. Based on experience, most pet stores such as PetSmart and PetCo will not carry a cage big enough to house one rat, let alone two rats. The minimum floor space needed for one rat is two square feet. For each additional rat, you need another square foot of space. This means that for two rats, you need at least three-square feet of floor space (ASPCA). The cage should also be a multi-level cage because rats enjoy jumping and climbing. One cage that is highly recommended by popular animal advocates on YouTube such as Taylor Nicole Dean and Emma Lock is called a Double Critter Nation (retails on Amazon for about \$249.99). This cage is a two-story cage with plenty of climbing and playing room for your furry friends. Additionally, it is completely made of

metal, so there are no worries about your rat chewing through the cage.



Large rat cage with a proper amount of toys

The cage should also include many toys, tunnels, obstacles, and mini huts for your pet rats to hide and sleep in. Rats are smart animals and they require lots of stimulation to keep them from getting bored. Rats particularly enjoy toys that they can push around and chew on. My rats have always preferred wooden blocks that they can easily chew on and carry with them as they move around their cage. Rats also enjoy having tunnels and hammocks to sleep, snuggle, and jump on. If you do not see your rats in their cage anywhere, they are most likely just snuggling in a tunnel!

Choosing a Food:

Pet rats are too smart for their own good. When they see normal food, they will eat the yummy parts and leave the healthy parts alone. If you choose a mixed bag of food, they will eat the fatty seeds and leave the grains and veggies in the bowl until you refill the bowl.



While this is cute, it is not healthy for the rats. Instead, you will want to choose a food that looks more like a kibble because it combines all of the ingredients into one hard piece rather than keeping everything separate. I personally recommend Oxbow Essentials Adult Rat Food (\$27.89 for a 6lbs bag) – it contains all of the important ingredients and none of the yucky ones and most rats enjoy it. The kibble should make up around 70 percent of your rat’s diet, and fresh fruits and vegetables should make up about 25 percent. I usually mix in a little bit of apple or peach and some broccoli or



green beans. Treats should make up about 5 percent of your rat’s diet – but

if you get a healthy treat, then you can give them more. My rats love to eat berry yogurt and cheez-its as their treats.

The First Few Nights

During the first few nights with your new pets, they will be very anxious. You will want to leave them in their cage to explore their surroundings for the first couple of days. They will run away from you and be scared. If you force them to interact with you before they are comfortable in their environment, it will make bonding with them much harder because they will associate you with fear. After they are comfortable (playing, running around, etc.) you

can begin to bond with them by letting them out of their cage in an enclosed area and allowing them to smell you and get to know you.

Feeding Schedule:



When you are letting the rats adjust to their surroundings, it is important to set up a feeding schedule. For younger rats, I would suggest feeding them twice a day. The last time you feed them during the day should be later in the night to help them sleep. Rats follow the natural eating cycle of searching for food, eating, and then sleeping. If you feed them around 9pm, they will go to bed around 10 or 11 pm and then sleep throughout a good portion of the night. However, if you feed them around 4 or 5 pm, they will be ready to play again in the middle of the night.

During this time, it is okay to give your new rats some extra treats. Giving them treats will help with bonding early on because they will associate you with treats and happiness. It will also speed up the process of them adjusting to their new cage.

Veterinary Care for Your Rats

When I adopted Scar and Toph, I never expected to have to take them to a vet, the same way most adults wouldn't expect to have to take a hamster to the vet. However, one night around 12:00am, Toph was on my boyfriend's shoulder playing and hanging out. He slipped and fell off of my boyfriend's shoulder and landed on the ground with a loud thump. He started having a seizure. After his seizure was over, we loaded him into a pet carrier and took him to the closest emergency vet there was that accepted pet rats. After an hour and a half long car ride, we got to the vet and she prescribed him medicines for the swelling, and we scheduled a follow up

appointment to be sure the seizures didn't continue. This vet bill cost me \$157.39.

When you get a small animal, you just assume that vet trips will be infrequent. However, rats tend to get sick very easily. Rats have extremely sensitive respiratory systems and something as simple as a cold can turn into a deadly sickness very quickly. Additionally, for how small and fragile rats are, they really enjoy jumping from heights that could kill them. There are many more situations where a pet rat can require a vet visit, and unfortunately, most pet rats will have to go to the vet in their lifetime. I highly suggest always having a fund available for vet costs (usually between \$100 and \$200) because the expense is a lot of money if you aren't prepared. I also suggest making sure that a vet in your area will take care of pet rats because many vets will not. I would also recommend finding out where your nearest emergency vet is and if they accept rats, because rats will always choose the most inconvenient times to have an emergency.

Once you and your new pets get used to each other and bond, you will see why having a pet rat is one of the most rewarding experiences. Pet rats are extremely loving and fun. They will love you in the same way that a dog would, and their eyes will light up and they will get visibly excited when they see you walk near their cage. I would recommend getting pet rats to anybody who wants an extremely loving small animal.



Works Cited

ASPCA. (2010). *Rat Care Sheet*. Retrieved from Animal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals: https://www.aspca.org/sites/default/files/rat_care.pdf

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