



<http://www.ratanooga.co.za>

A complete detailed Rat Care Guide is available for download on our website.

BRINGING YOUR NEW RAT HOME:

(Taken from: “Getting acquainted with your new rat”, by Karen Yang)

Unless your new rats are very social and used to being around people, they will need a few days to feel comfortable in their new home. This doesn't mean you should ignore them completely, but just give them some space and time to adjust. During this phase, don't take them out of their cage/room/whatever too often, but let them get used to the fact that where they are living is their new home and belongs to them alone. Do stop by to chat with them often to get them used to hearing your voice. Treats are especially welcome during this period and will help immensely in getting your new rats to love and trust you. (The way to a rat's heart may not be through its stomach, but it's awfully close!)

Please bear in mind that new rats may nip, but this is very rare and mostly found in pet store rats that have had little human contact or socialising. They are not trying to hurt you, they are just saying “if you are here to hurt me, I've got teeth and can protect myself.” Please don't “punish” or yell at your rat. Say “No” in a firm voice and remove your hand. A lot of new or young rats tend to bite through the bars. This can be fear and can also be learning to tell food from friend. Don't stick your fingers between the bars or straight into the cage initially. **If you want your rat, open the cage and sit quietly and let him or her come to you.** Always remember that rats are not vicious, and love people. They are just small and need time to learn that you won't hurt them.

GIVE THEM TIME TO GET USED TO YOU

Rats are social and need to know where they stand in the pecking order. They also need to know where you fit in. If you play the role of a gentle, bigger, older rat, they will respect you and also become very affectionate toward you. When you begin to spend more time with your rats, allow them to run around near you in a place where they can't hide from you, but where they have enough room to get away from you if they get scared. Beds, bathroom floors, hallways, etc. are good for this. When you pick up your rat to take them to where you want to play, give your rats a chance to climb on you by themselves. Some rats love to climb anything and will willingly zoom up to your shoulder. If they refuse to have anything to do with you, you can pick them up by grabbing them firmly behind the front legs with one hand and supporting their back legs with the other hand. Cradle them against your body or allow them to climb up to your shoulder from that position. Most rats hate to be picked up, but won't mind sitting on your shoulders or being held in your arms

The first few times you have your rats out to play, they will probably not want to have much to do with you. This is because they are still unsure of who you are and where you fit in. The best way to get through this stage fairly quickly is to ignore them right back. Sit on your bed or floor with them running around and read a book. Bring a box of yummy cereal or healthy snacks and read and eat while ignoring them. Soon they'll decide they want to interact with you. You'll know you've been accepted as a friend when they start climbing all over you and asking for treats. Some other signs of acceptance are: hearing them brux (chattering teeth and vibrate) (chatter teeth and vibrate) at you, having them try to take food from your mouth or climbing up your shoulders and checking out your ears. If they mark you with little droplets of urine, you'll know you are at least considered a safe place to be - flattering, huh?

HANDLING YOUR RAT

As said before, rats become very tame and make wonderful pets. Regular handling is the key to keeping your rat tame and trusting. When picking up your rat, always cup it gently in your hands, making sure it feels supported. Don't squeeze it and NEVER pick it up by its tail. Rats can deglove (dislocate) their tails and it is extremely painful. Your rat can be taught to sit on your shoulder, but always be aware of where it is and what it's doing so it doesn't fall.

COMPANIONSHIP

Rats are very social and MUST be kept in pairs or groups of same sex or neutered rats. A single rat, even with lots of daily human attention, will NEVER be as happy and content as a rat with a companion. Remember that rats play at night when we are asleep. How would you like to live alone, in a cage? Rats can be kept in groups of up to six females per cage and four males per cage (PROVIDED THE CAGES ARE BIG ENOUGH FOR THIS!).

They should be able to stretch on their hind legs in their cage and they should be able to climb (which comes very naturally to them). We suggest 2 of the same or similar age, and adding a 3rd a few months later to vary the ages, so that one rat is never left if the other dies. Never house males and females together. Females are in heat every 4-5 days and "the act" takes seconds to complete. **Rats can also breed from only 5wks of age and need to be separated immediately to prevent unwanted litters.**

CAGE, BEDDING & COMFORTS

NEVER KEEP RATS IN AQUARIUMS. With rats, bigger is ALWAYS better. A wire sided cage is recommended as it provides better ventilation than aquariums. Consider the fact that the urine smell has nowhere to escape to in an aquarium. Imagine being locked in a room without a window where everybody is breathing and urinating - the smell of ammonia would be horrific. It would most certainly affect your breathing.

DO NOT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES use cedar or pine shavings which contain TOXIC hydrocarbons and are dangerous to rats. DO NOT USE CAT LITTERS. Bedding can be made from shredded paper, felt, cloths (which should be washed daily to ensure cleanliness) brown bags, toilet paper, etc. Don't use cotton, yarn or old rags because threads can get wrapped around their legs or necks. Avoid printed newspaper. There is a large amount of ink that comes off the paper as a dust and this can cause respiratory problems and too much ink may be toxic to small animals. **Unprinted newsprint** is great for lining cages, shelves or tearing up for nesting bedding. This is available from packaging companies like Future Packaging or from RASCALS Bio Pet Litter. Highly recommended is **Amazing Corncob Litter by Cobtech**. Totally organic, non-toxic and biodegradable. Maximum odour control and locks away moisture to keep your pet dry and healthy. **Kenaf Litter** by Sustainable Fibre Solutions offers another good alternative to litter. It's organic, non-toxic, keeps away odours and moisture and has had very good reviews from rat owners since it's release on the small-animal market. See page 6 for all litter contacts.

Rats like a snug place to sleep. A variety of clean household items, such as milk jugs, jars and ink-free boxes, are easily replaced when needed. Also favoured are plastic plant pots, even bird's nests, ice cream tubs and wine boxes.

CLEANING THE CAGE AND THE AREA AROUND IT

Rat's cages can be cleaned with a white vinegar solution or F10 (available from vets) and rinsed afterwards with clean warm water. **Do not use regular detergents or soaps!**

In the environment around the rats, be very careful what you use. We lost most of a litter because someone put down carpet freshener (powder) on the carpet near cages and lost 5 of a litter of 8 and almost all the adult rats too. Don't spray fresheners, deodorants, etc around rats or create dust etc as their lungs are extremely sensitive. Be equally careful of pesticides. Even if you are spraying in the next room the poison carries. Rather close and seal the room where your rats are first, and open all windows where you are busy. **Smoking around rats is a BIG NO!**
RULE OF THUMB: RATHER SAFE THAN SORRY!

TEMPERATURE AND ENVIRONMENT

Rats are vulnerable to high temperatures and should ideally be kept in a place that is well ventilated (but not in a draught) and that does not exceed 25°C. Remember that a rat's body temp is around 3 deg higher than ours. **Domestic rats are indoor pets and should not be expected to stay outdoors.**

WATER

Water bottles keep the water cleaner than a bowl or dish, but this is entirely your choice. Some rats enjoy being able to wash or play in a large water bowl. Plastic wide-mouth bottles with a ball-bearing are the best thing otherwise. The food dish should be secured and non-tippable. **Never give rat's tap water, only purified/bottled water. Tap water contains a lot of chloride and sodium and will cause tumours.**

FEEDING & TREATS:

Generic hamster mix is neither adequate nor suitable for rats (too many sunflower seeds!)

Their basic diet should be proper rat food such as Reggie Rat or Rat Nature (remove all peanuts as these are bad for rats). These can be purchased or ordered through most pet stores or veterinary stores. These store bought feeds can also be mixed with a small amount of cereals (weetabix, cornflakes, pronutro flakes, rice crispies etc.) and raw whole wheat macaroni. Try to avoid too much corn and protein (max 16%) in the rat's diet as this could cause allergic skin reactions. You can also mix dog pellets with your mix to bulk it up and provide additional dietary benefits. Ensure the protein content of the dog pellets is no more than 16-18%.

Supplement a rat's diet with fresh fruits or veggies everyday: Eg: Paw-paw, grapes, apples, cucumber, carrots, cooked sweet potato and butternut, broccoli (especially RAW), tomato, live-culture yogurt, etc. Rats are also omnivores so they love small pieces of chicken, boiled egg white, cooked chicken bones and rib bones. Keep this to about 3x a week until they are 12 weeks old and then reduce to 1 or 2 x week as they get older.

FORBIDDEN FOODS!!

Dangerous foods to give your rat include raw peanuts, fruit seeds, blue cheese, carbonated beverages, green bananas, green potato skin or onions, liquorice, oranges or orange juice, raw artichokes, raw bulk tofu or meat, beans, raw red cabbage or brussel sprouts, raw sweet potato, rhubarb, peanut butter, wild insects, dried corn, mashed potato, avocado pear, spicy or salty foods. Also limit their intake of junk food it's as bad for them as it is for us. Rats should also not eat cheese or drink milk (many rats are lactose intolerant).

TOYS

Rats love toys, so a rat hammock is always a hit. Simply hang a piece of material (track suit or denim material works well) from the cage roof with bulldog clips. Another cheap toy is a Munchy Parcel. Wrap treats in scrunched-up balls of white paper and let your rat unwrap his treat himself. Multiple layers of paper add to the fun. A toilet roll with toilet paper on it can provide bedding AND endless fun for rats in their cage. Just stand it in the cage, and leave. Wooden parrot toys and rawhide dog chews also make good rat toys. In summer, a fun game for your rats is to fill up a large tray or Tupperware with water and throw in some frozen peas and or frozen sweet corn, then let them play and cool off in the water as they fish out the veggies.

TOILET HABITS

At first, your rats will probably be very nervous around you, and their bathroom habits will reflect this! After they get used to you, the puddles and piles of "ratty raisins" will stop appearing every time they are out. Rats prefer to go to the bathroom in their own territory, and will stop having accidents when they are out visiting with you when they are calmer (unless, of course, they've been out too long and really have to go). Younger rats will take a bit more time to get their toilet habits under control, but they will eventually learn. Just have some paper towels or tissues standing by in the beginning to clean up the occasional mess. Little dribbles of pee are rats' way of marking safe places and letting other rats know that they've passed by - these will continue to appear, especially if you have male rats!

DISCIPLINE

Rats have the attention span and ability to cause the havoc of a human toddler. If you discipline them as such, you shouldn't have too many problems. **This means you should never use pain or fear to get your rats to stop doing something, but instead channel their energy into something you approve of.** For example, if your rats decide to chew up one of your favourite books, remove the book from their reach and replace it with something they're allowed to play with. Also like toddlers, rats use their teeth to investigate new things, so if you get a nip or two the first few days you have your rats, it doesn't mean they're biters. It just means they're checking you out or maybe you smell like something yummy that you just ate. If they nip too hard, yell or squeak at them to let them know that you've been hurt, but please don't hurt them back. If your rats have an annoying habit that you'd like to put an end to, like attacking your socks while they're still on your feet (and believe me, 99% of rats do this!), you can try doing what an older rat would do. While your rat is engaged in the annoying habit, pick rat up, flip rat on back and tickle or kiss tummy until rat squirms. Flipping is a way of asserting dominance and putting an end to annoying behaviour. You may need to do this several times before your rat gets the message. With rats, gentle discipline is all that's necessary. **If you're too rough with them, you may end up with a rat that's too aggressive or too scared to be a good friend.**

RESPIRATORY PROBLEMS

One of the most common health problems in rats is respiratory illness. Treatment should be started as soon as symptoms appear, or irreversible damage may be done to the nasal passages and lungs. Infections such as pneumonia should be taken very seriously as they can kill a rat in only a few days.

Mycoplasma Pulmonis (Myco) is a bacteria that is found in almost every rat. When rats are young and healthy, their immune systems are able to keep the bacteria in check, but if their immune systems are weakened the bacteria can multiply and cause more damage. **Symptoms of a myco or respiratory infection usually include porphyrin (red/pink discharge) around the nose and eyes, sneezing, noisy breathing and "coughing" (sounds like hiccups or chirping).**

RESPIRATORY INFECTION / MYCO TREATMENT:

You must get medication from a vet for this! There are quite a few factors that can greatly increase the chance of a myco flare-up or infection: the use of pine or cedar shavings, ammonia from a dirty cage, smoke, chemicals or harmful fumes, vitamin A or E deficiency, stress, old age, or illness. Rats kept in draft can also have a myco flare up.

If the myco is able to multiply enough, it will start to irritate the lining of the nasal passages and lungs, causing them to produce mucus and scar tissue. The myco can also spread to the inner ear (seen as head-tilt) or uterus/genitals and move from the upper to lower respiratory, becoming pneumonia. There is no cure for myco, but respiratory infections can be treated. Antibiotics, a healthy diet, a clean cage, and an environment free from stress will help keep your rat's immune system strong and able to fight the myco. If a myco flare-up or infection occurs, you need to get antibiotics from your vet.

Baytril (usually used in combination with Doxycycline) is the more effective antibiotics against myco, but Tetracycline, Tylosin, Zithromax and Erythromycin are also capable of fighting myco and secondary infections. Humidifiers, Bisolvon (Decongestant), nebulisers, or having them in the bathroom with a shower running can also help ease congested lungs. In most cases, eventually the myco will become resistant to treatment and the rat will not be able to breathe freely. In the late stages the rat may gasp through his/her mouth, become restless, the feet and tail tip may turn blue from lack of oxygen, and if the infection reaches the inner-ear head-tilt will also develop. When your rat's quality of life becomes poor, euthanasia (**with anaesthetic gas only!**) should be considered.

RAT RELATED LINKS & CONTACTS

Fancy Rat Breeders

Jackalhead Rattery: <http://www.freewebs.com/jackalheadrats>
Little Squeakers Rattery: <http://www.littlesqueakers.co.za>
Pretoria Rattery: <http://www.ratsforafrica.webs.com>
Runebound Rattery: <http://www.runeboundrattery.bravehost.com>
Settican Rattery: <http://www.rattery.settican.com>
Waverley Rattery: <http://www.waverleyrattery.co.za>
Wheatfields Rattery: <http://www.wheatfieldsrattery.co.za>
Whiskers Rattery: <http://whiskersrattery.weebly.com>

Rat Clubs & Rescues

Ratanooga: <http://www.ratanooga.co.za>
Ratanooga Forums: <http://forums.ratanooga.co.za>
Rascals Rescue: <http://www.rattyascals.co.za>
Rascals Forums: <http://www.rattyascals.co.za/forums>
Rats In Action: <http://ratsinaction.weebly.com/>
SocRatties: <http://www.freewebs.com/socratties>

Rat Cages, Toys & Accessories

Online Rat Store: <http://www.mischiefproducts.com>
Hammocks & Cubes: <http://www.ratcomforts.co.za>
Hammocks & Cubes: Email: hemming.lolly@gmail.com
Hammocks & Cubes: Email: uphighhammocks@gmail.com
Petmania Pet Store: <http://www.petmaniaonline.co.za>
Rat Year Calendars: <http://www.ratanooga.co.za>

Bedding & Litter

Kenaf Litter Direct: <http://www.kenaf.co.za>
Amaizing Corncob: <http://www.rascalspetlitter.co.za>

Rat Health & Veterinarians

Recommended SA Vets Vet listings at <http://www.ratanooga.co.za>
The Rat Health Guide <http://ratguide.com>