



Mice

Just like rats, mice don't have the best reputation. Filthy, gross, vermin – you name it, they've been called it! For many people, "companion" is definitely not the first word that comes to mind when they think about mice.

Yet, when you take a closer look, you'll find that mice are **amazing**, even **affectionate** animals. (And for those of you who are already huge mouse fans, this is old news!)



PHOTO: EMILIA STASIAK

Mice have had a close relationship with people for a long time. Our towns and cities draw them in, providing a constant supply of food and plenty of shelter. So as we moved around the globe, mice followed – and multiplied. In fact, mice are probably more widespread than any other mammal on earth, apart from humans!

What began as a relationship of dependence, over time became one of companionship. Fascinated by their **curiosity**, **intelligence** and **resourcefulness**, people began to keep tame mice. Eventually, from their wild mouse cousins, a range of friendly, domesticated mice emerged – today's pet mice.

Mice make excellent companions. They are **smart** and **gentle**, not to mention **entertaining** to watch and hang out with. They each have their own unique personality and are fun to get to know.

So give mice a chance! They might just surprise you.



Can you tell the difference?

They may share a similar history, but mice and rats are not the same. Rats are larger and have thicker tails, while mice have pointier faces and more delicate hind feet. They also behave differently as pets. Rats typically require more attention and tend to enjoy interacting with people more than mice do.



BOTH PHOTOS: MARINA MASLENNIKOVA

Make your house a home for a mouse

Mice are curious and energetic pets, requiring a patient, attentive guardian. Here are just some of the care and welfare needs of mice. The pet care section of the BC SPCA website – spca.bc.ca – has more detailed mouse care information.

Mouse meals

Being omnivores, mice eat both plant and animal products. Feed your mice a staple diet of rodent food (called rodent or lab block). Rodent block is a complete, balanced diet and should be available to them all the time. Provide a small amount of vegetables, fruits, nuts and seeds every day, too. Mice crave variety! Be sure to remove any uneaten fresh food the next day so it doesn't spoil and make them sick.

Snack attack

Mice love treats! Foods such as unsweetened cereals, plain popcorn and cooked pasta make great snacks. Just don't feed too many or you'll end up with fat, unhealthy mice.

Handle with care

Mice move quickly and can be tricky to handle. You can pick up your mice by putting cupped hands near them and letting them crawl into your hands. Be careful not to squeeze! Hold your mice while sitting on the floor. Not all mice enjoy being held and they may try to leap from your hands.

My, what big teeth you have!

To help wear down their ever-growing front teeth, provide your mice with chewing items such as cardboard, Timothy hay, wooden toys and apple or aspen branches. Make sure the branches come from trees that haven't been treated with any chemicals.

Mouse house

Mice are active animals requiring a large habitat. The more space, the better! Mice like to burrow so a deep enclosure with a solid bottom is best. A 20 gallon aquarium with a wire mesh lid works well for a pair or trio of mice. Aquariums are secure and can easily be filled with burrowing material.

Drink up!

Mice need water available to them all the time. Fill your mice's sipper bottle with clean, fresh water every day. Once a week, clean the bottle using soap and water. Avoid water dishes. Mice tend to bury them as they dig, creating a soggy mess.

Clean and dark

Clean the cage several times a week to keep your mice healthy. Ammonia from urine can irritate their lungs and lead to illness. Keep the cage in an area protected from cold drafts and direct sunlight, as well as loud noises and bright lights. Mice like darkness!

Social life

Ideally, mice should not be kept alone. Two or more can live together provided they are the same sex and have a large habitat. For all those hours people are at work or school (or asleep), think how happy your mouse will be having a mouse friend! They'll eat,

play and sleep together, and groom each other. Females tend to be more sociable than males. Male mice are prone to fighting and may need to be housed by themselves.

To help prevent squabbles, males should come from the same litter or be introduced to each other when they are very young. Even then, they may still fight once they reach sexual maturity.

Working out

Mice require daily exercise and will happily explore a playpen made just for them. A wading pool or a bathtub (drain closed!) lined with a towel works well. Fill with safe objects to climb on, over and through to keep your mice busy and interested. Paper bags, cereal boxes, paper cups, toilet paper rolls and untreated wood are good choices. Always supervise playtime.

What's that smell?

Compared to female mice, male mice have a strong, musky odour. The reason? Males scent mark their environment with urine. You can reduce (but not eliminate) the smell by cleaning your mice's cage regularly. Keep in mind, though, the more you clean their enclosure, the more they will scent mark – making the smell even stronger! Also, cleaning too often can be stressful on mice. The key is to find a balance between a little odour and a healthy environment for your mice.

Meticulous mice

Mice are fantastic groomers. They spend lots of time each day carefully cleaning themselves – and each other – all over.

Millions of mice

Never keep male and female mice together, even for a short period. Mice multiply at an amazing rate. Females can have up to 10 litters in just one year, with anywhere from three to 12 young per litter.



PHOTO: CHELSEY PLATER



The eyes have it

Mouse eyes are extremely sensitive to light. Primarily nocturnal, mice evolved the ability to see in near total darkness. Bright household lights and direct sunlight can cause eye damage, so keep your mice's enclosure in a dimly lit area.

The nose knows

Mice have a highly developed sense of smell. They use scent to communicate, find food and even detect predators. Avoid using strong-smelling household cleaners, air fresheners and scented bedding materials. Keep other pets away from your mice. The scent of potential predators like cats and dogs may upset them.

Taste test

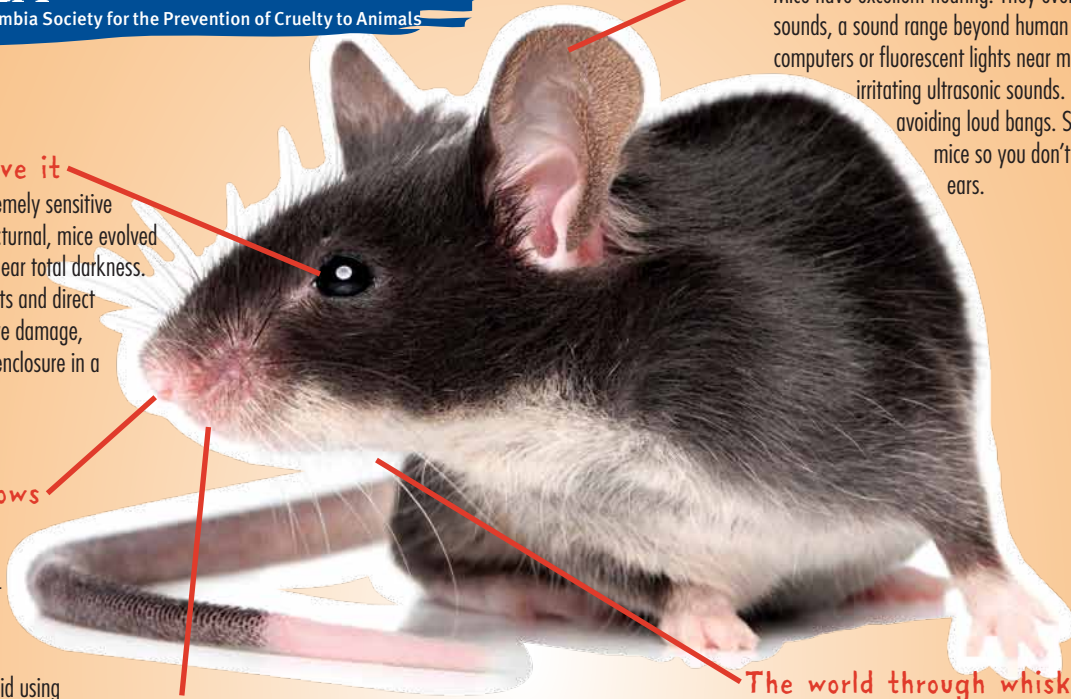
Mice have a sense of taste similar to our own. Just as we like a variety of foods, so do mice! And, like us, mice do not always want what's best for them. They may pick out their favourite foods and leave the rest. By waiting to top up their food dish, your mice will be encouraged to eat a more balanced and healthy diet.

Do you hear what I hear?

Mice have excellent hearing. They even hear ultrasonic sounds, a sound range beyond human hearing. Avoid using computers or fluorescent lights near mice as both make irritating ultrasonic sounds. Clean cages quietly, avoiding loud bangs. Speak softly to your mice so you don't hurt their sensitive ears.

The world through whiskers

Mice use their sensitive whiskers to create a detailed picture of their surroundings. When moving, mice like to remain in contact with a solid surface such as a wall – a special behaviour called "thigmotaxis" [thig-muh-tax-iss]. Being a prey species, they avoid open areas so add lots of hiding places in their habitat. Their whiskers will help them navigate the twists and turns with ease.

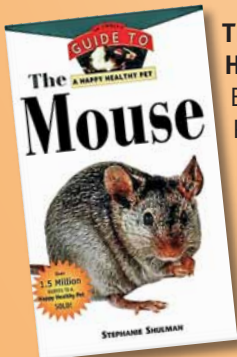


Thinking like a mouse

Knowing how mice perceive the world can help you be the best guardian.
The trick is to think like a mouse!

Mouse musings

This booklet provides basic care information. Please visit spca.bc.ca/animalcare for more detailed mouse care information. You can also scurry on over to these other great mouse resources:



The Mouse: An Owner's Guide to a Happy Healthy Pet

By Stephanie Shulman
Published by Howell Book House

The Fun Mouse

thefunmouse.com

Rat and Mouse Club of America

rmca.org

The mouse guardian pledge

As their guardian, you are responsible for your mice's health and well-being. You should make sure:

1. They never go hungry or thirsty;
2. They are taken to the vet when they are sick or injured;
3. They are not afraid all the time;
4. They are comfortable in their surroundings;
5. They are free to behave like mice!

For more information on providing these "Five Freedoms," check out spca.bc.ca/animalcare.

ARE YOU A SMALL ANIMAL WHIZ? TAKE THE QUIZ!

Circle your answers, then flip the page to see if you were right!



Small animals have such fascinating behaviours. Do you know what they mean? Put your knowledge to the test with our petite pet puzzlers.

1. A rabbit rubs her chin on things because...

- a. she's marking them with her scent.
- b. some of the yummy banana she just ate is stuck to her fur.
- c. she's itchy.



4. Stuffing his cheeks with food means a hamster...

- a. is super-duper hungry.
- b. has no table manners whatsoever!
- c. is going to stash it all away somewhere in his cage.



Yep. Like, totally.

5. Sometimes, a rat bobs her head up and down. She's...

- a. groovin' to some music.
- b. trying to figure out how far away something is before she takes a big leap.
- c. nodding in agreement to something you've just said.



2. When a guinea pig makes a "wheek, wheek" noise, he's...

- a. warning other guinea pigs of danger.
- b. demanding his morning veggies. Like, right now!
- c. singing his little heart out.



6. A mouse gnawing on the bars of his cage over and over...

- a. is trying to escape.
- b. just really likes to chew. Have you seen those long front teeth?
- c. needs more iron in his diet.



3. A gerbil scratching madly at the corners of her cage wants to...

- a. escape.
- b. get some much-needed exercise. Aerobics, anyone?
- c. make a burrow.



Answers:

1. a. Rabbits have scent glands under their chin. They rub these glands on objects in their environment to mark their territory.
2. b. Guinea pigs make the "wheek, wheek" sound when they are hungry and looking forward to being fed.
3. c. Often, gerbils who scratch at the corners of their cage are living in habitats without enough burrowing material to dig in. They need to be able to burrow underground to feel safe.
4. c. Hamsters are hoarders! They use their large cheek pouches to carry food back to a hiding spot.
5. b. Rats have poor depth perception. Bobbing up and down helps them to judge the distance of a jump better.
6. a. Mice often chew on cage bars because they want to escape. They need to be given plenty of hiding places to feel safe and lots of interesting things to do in their cage.



Don't forget the FIVE FREEDOMS!

Take a moment to think about the Five Freedoms before you make a purchase:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst
2. Freedom from pain, injury and disease
3. Freedom from distress
4. Freedom from discomfort
5. Freedom to express behaviours that promote well-being

Ask yourself questions like: Could this product **hurt** my pet or make him **uncomfortable** in any way? Does this product allow my pet to express herself, or will it just make her **nervous**?

If you're at all unsure, **skip it!** You might need to do more research to make sure it's right for your furry friend.

LET'S GO SHOPPING!

Your guide to buying small animal supplies



STAY AWAY!

Yogurt drops

These sweet treats have way more sugar than small animals need!



For a healthier snack, try small pieces of banana instead.

Wire wheels

Tails and toes can easily get caught between the rungs. Ouch!



Stick with wheels that have solid surfaces – like ones made of plastic. They're safer and more comfortable.

Cotton fluff

Hamsters, rats, mice and gerbils love to make nests. But cotton fluff has small threads that can wrap around and seriously injure their legs and feet.



Toilet paper and strips of newspaper are a safer option for nesting materials.

Pine and cedar shavings

Pine and cedar smell nice to us, but they can cause breathing issues in small animals.



Recycled paper bedding and aspen shavings are good alternatives.



Exercise balls

Not all hamsters enjoy running around in a ball. Plus, it's easy for them to get stuck in a corner and forgotten – or accidentally kicked!



A better choice? Set up an exercise area where small animals can roam around freely and safely.





BE CAREFUL!

Chew toys

Small animals can enjoy gnawing on toys made from a variety of materials such as wood and dried hay. But remember: any toy can become dangerous when too much of it gets eaten or it falls apart!

Be sure to check toys for damage, and throw them out when they're no longer safe.

Cardboard – like toilet paper and paper towel rolls – makes a great, safe (and free!) chew item for small animals.



Seed mixes

Rats, mice, gerbils and hamsters are huge seed fans. But feed them too many and they'll end up fat and unhealthy! High quality pellets should make up most of their diet.



Seeds can be given in small amounts as treats.



GO FOR IT!

Treat balls

Rats, guinea pigs and rabbits can quickly learn to roll these balls around and gobble up the food that falls out. This keeps their minds and bodies active!



Exercise pens

Exercise pens made just for small animals have narrow bars to prevent escape (or no bars at all!). Fill a pen with lots of objects for them to crawl over, under and through. This lets them safely explore the world outside their cage. They'll still need supervision, of course.



Know before you go

When shopping for small animal supplies, keep these two things in mind:

1. Just because a store sells a product doesn't mean that product is safe for animals.

Sadly, some products are downright dangerous for our pets. That's why it's important to do your research first. Talk to people who have the same type of pet as you. Read product reviews online to learn about potential safety concerns.

2. Products are marketed to people, not pets.

After all, we're the ones buying them! We're often drawn to a product because the label catches our eye or we like the colours it comes in. But just because we want it doesn't mean our pets need it.