

Rats

Rats have a pretty bad 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 rats.

When you take a closer look, though, we bet you’ll find that rats are amazing animals. (And for those of you who are already huge rat fans, this is old news!)

Rats 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, rats followed – and multiplied. In fact, rats outnumber humans on almost every continent in the world!

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 rats. Eventually, from their wild rat cousins, a range of friendly, domesticated rats emerged – today’s pet rats.

Rats make excellent companions. They are smart and affectionate, 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 rats a chance!
They might just surprise you.**



PHOTO: OLEG KOZLOV/ISTOCK

Rat Stats

- Origin:** Asia
- Status:** Began to be domesticated nearly 200 years ago
- Life Span:** Usually two to three years
- Size:** Weigh up to about 650 g and measure 23 to 28 cm in length (plus an 18 to 23 cm tail)
- Coat:** Comes in a few “styles,” from smooth to curly
- Colour:** Many different colours and patterns, like cinnamon or “Dalmatian” (black spots on white)

Be a rat-tastic guardian!

Rats require plenty of attention, but they make great companions.

Here are just some of the things you need to know. Check out the pet care section of the BC SPCA website - spca.bc.ca - for more detailed rat care information.

Healthy, happy rodents

Spending time with your rats will show you how they normally look and behave. When you notice something unusual - like breathing problems or loss of appetite - you'll know to take them to the veterinarian right away!

Snack time

Rats love treats! Things like unsweetened cereals, dog biscuits and dried pasta make great snacks for rats. Just don't feed too many or you'll end up with fat, unhealthy rats!

On the menu

Being omnivores, rats eat both plant and animal products. Feed your rats a staple diet of rodent food (called rodent or lab blocks). 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. Rats crave variety!

Hit or miss

Some rats can be trained to use a litter box, while others may never use one consistently. But it's worth a try! A plastic cat litter pan works well.

Please don't squeeze!

Rats love attention, but they must be handled gently and carefully. Always pick up your rat with two hands: one hand under his hind end and the other around his chest. Never pick a rat up by his tail.

Keeping fit

Rats require daily exercise and will happily romp around a room that has been cleared of hazards such as electrical cords, cats or dogs and poisonous plants. They love to run along walls and hide under furniture. Rat-proofing is key. Keep in mind, a rat can squeeze through any opening she can get her head through!

Interior decorating

Adding small houses, ropes, hanging toys, plastic cat toys, hammocks, ladders and tubes provides stimulation and places to hide and sleep. Swap items in and out to keep your rats' cage interesting.

Rat palace

Rats are active animals requiring a large habitat. Each rat needs at least two square feet of space to himself. The more space, the better! A tall cage with multiple levels for climbing is best. Be sure the bar spacing is no larger than half an inch apart for young rats and an inch apart for adult rats to prevent escape. Habitat bottoms should be solid, not mesh or wire, which can hurt rat feet. Wire shelves should be covered to prevent injuries, too.

Rapidly reproducing rats

Never keep male and female rats together, even for a short period (unless they are neutered or spayed). Rats multiply at an amazing rate. Females can have up to 11 litters in just one year, with anywhere from six to 12 young per litter.

A clean, comfy home

For bedding, use wood shavings such as aspen, shredded paper, CareFRESH® (bedding made from recycled paper) or a thick, clean blanket. Do not use cedar or pine shavings because they can cause health problems. Clean the cage several times a week to keep your rats 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 bright lights. Rats like darkness!

Social life

Rats should not be kept alone! Two or more can live together as long as they are the same sex and have a large enough living space. For all those hours people are at work or school (or asleep), think how happy your rat will be having a rat friend around! They'll eat, play and sleep together, and groom each other.

My, what big teeth you have!

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

Hoarders

Rats often hoard their food, so be sure to look for hidden stashes. Take away any uneaten fresh food the next day so it doesn't spoil and make them sick.

Drink up!

Rats need water available to them all the time. Fill your rats' sipper bottle or heavy ceramic dish with clean, fresh water every day. Use soap and water to clean them out - once a week for bottles and daily for dishes.

Who are you calling a dirty rat?

Rats are actually great groomers. They spend lots of time each day carefully cleaning themselves - and each other - all over.



PHOTO: ASHLEY DARLING





Ian hasta have his pasta!



David makes bobbing for peas look easy peasy!

Recipes for rats

Rats are fun to feed because they clearly take such pleasure in eating! Things like plain popcorn, oatmeal, scrambled egg and cooked pasta or rice are easy to make and bound to be a hit with your rats. (Just be sure to feed these foods in small amounts – they're not meant to be a replacement for a well-balanced diet.)

Game time!

Rats love to have fun – with each other and with their guardian. Plus, they always seem to have energy to burn! Try challenging your rats with these games:

Bobbing for peas

Fill a shallow dish or bowl with about an inch of water. Pour in some peas. It won't take long for your rats to figure out how to fish for them!

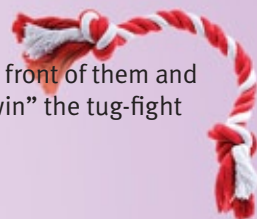


Obstacle course

Create a jungle gym for your rats. Use PVC pipes, cardboard boxes, wooden ladders, the legs cut off an old pair of jeans – pretty much anything you can think of that your rats will want to explore. Then let 'em loose and watch your rats climb all over!

Tug-o-war

Rats love to chase things! Wiggle a piece of string or rope in front of them and they'll try to snatch it from you. Just make sure you let them "win" the tug-fight every once in a while.



Tunnelling for treats

Rats are natural burrowers. Fill a large plastic container with potting soil from a garden store. Be sure to place the container on a towel – this is one messy game! Sprinkle and bury some treats around the container. Then sit back and watch your rats have a blast digging for the goodies.



Resourceful rats

This booklet provides basic care information. Please visit spca.bc.ca/animalcare for more detailed information on rat care. You can also sniff out these other great rat resources:

My Rat

By Gerd Ludwig

Published by Barron's Educational Series, Inc.

Rats: Practical Advice from the Expert

By Debbie Ducommun

Published by BowTie Press



The rat guardian pledge

As their guardian, you are responsible for your rats' 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 rats!

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



The Dapper Rat
dapper.com.au

Rats Rule
ratsrule.com

Rat Behavior and Biology
ratbehavior.org

A Rat's World

Rats are really cool animals with some amazing abilities



Rats be nimble

Rats are excellent climbers and swimmers. They can scale vertical surfaces and walk along ropes and power lines, just like tightrope walkers. With their whiskers helping keep their heads above water, rats can swim for kilometres. They can even hold their breath and swim underwater.

Rat laughter

Rats make a “laughing” sound when they’re happy, such as during play, at feeding time or when someone is tickling them.

The world through whiskers

Whiskers may well be more important than sight for a rat. More sensitive than our fingertips, rats use their whiskers to create a detailed picture of the world around them. Their whiskers sweep back and forth, about seven times per second, brushing over the ground, objects, food and other rats. Each whisker can move by itself and in different directions. Rats can also extend their whiskers as far as two inches in front of their noses to “see” what’s in front of them.

Rat chat

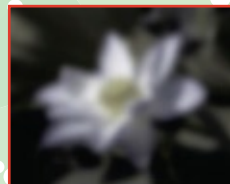
Rats “talk” with different squeaks. They also talk using ultrasonic sounds only rats can hear. Baby rats have a special call when they want their mother. Another unique noise is made by rats when they’re upset – when they smell a predator, are in pain or lose a fight with another rat.

Glowing rats

Rats can see in colour, but they see mostly greys, blues and greens. But they can also see ultraviolet colours, which we can’t. In fact, under ultraviolet light, their bodies glow so they can easily see each other in complete darkness. How cool is that?



Human eyesight



Rat eyesight



Rat under UV light



Smell you later

Smell helps rats communicate. By sniffing, a rat can tell a lot about other rats – like whether they’re male or female, how old they are, what they’ve been eating and whether they’re family members.

Super night vision

Rats’ eyes are extremely sensitive to light. Living in dark places, they evolved the ability to see in near total darkness. Rats can tell the difference between tiny changes in light intensity, when it would just look pitch black to us! Since rats are so sensitive to light, bright light – sunlight and even intense household lights – can cause eye damage.

What’s that smell?

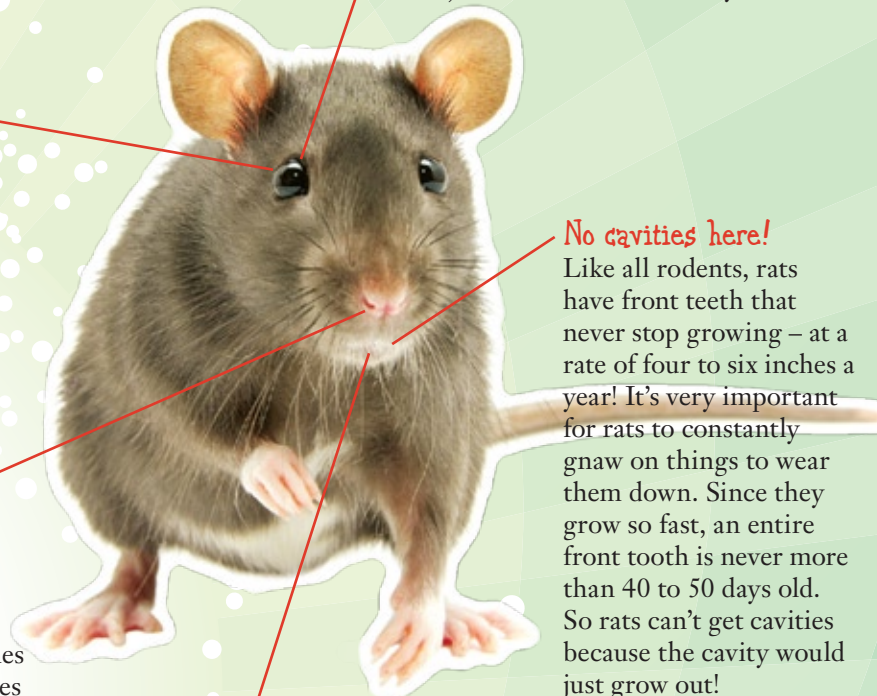
Rats have a fantastic sense of smell. Without moving their heads, they can locate where a scent is coming from three times as quickly as we can. This comes in handy when searching for food!

The big squeeze

Adult rats can flatten and squeeze their bodies through openings as small as a loonie.

A blurry rat world

Rat eyesight is poor – about 20 times worse than our own. Their depth perception is not good either, making it hard for them to judge whether objects are close or far away.



No cavities here!

Like all rodents, rats have front teeth that never stop growing – at a rate of four to six inches a year! It’s very important for rats to constantly gnaw on things to wear them down. Since they grow so fast, an entire front tooth is never more than 40 to 50 days old. So rats can’t get cavities because the cavity would just grow out!

Taste test

Rats taste sweetness, bitterness, saltiness and sourness – like us. They love sweet foods! When rats eat, they make faces like we do to show how much they like or dislike a food.

An amazing tail

Rats’ tails help them to regulate their body heat. The tail makes up only 5 percent of a rat’s surface area, but it can dissipate about 17 percent of a rat’s body heat. Rats use their tails to regulate their temperature by controlling the flow of blood through their tail – pumping more blood to cool themselves and less blood to stay warm.

Check it out!

Rats don't see well but have a keen sense of smell and hearing. If you startle one you

Kids Club members Steven DeBoer, and Emily and Hailey Down enjoying some quality time with Steven's rats Shadow, Spirit and Shiloh.

No Way! An adult rat can flatten and squeeze her body to fit through openings the size of a Loomie!



Rat-tastic!

"I love everything about them," says twelve-year-old Surrey Kids Club member Steven DeBoer about his three pet rats Spirit, Shiloh and Shadow. Steven got his trio from the SPCA about a year ago and they have been his best buddies ever since.

Rats are one of the friendliest, easy to care for pets you can have. They eat almost anything but you do need to make sure that you keep treats to a minimum or you might end up with fat rats!

Rats are awesome climbers, so get a large enclosure and outfit it with items they can climb and explore. Also, the more you handle your rats the friendlier they will be.

"My rats spend tons of time climbing all around my room," says Steven who loves to have his rats crawl all around his body. "Each has his own personality," he says.

"Spirit is the most adventurous and is always the first to explore new things."

Since rats are naturally social animals you really need to keep at least two of the same sex – either brothers or sisters – because rats breed quickly! They can have a litter of up to 14 baby rats in just over three weeks and the female can get pregnant again in as little as 24 hours. Your first adoption option should be your local SPCA shelter, otherwise go to a recognized breeder.

See the SPCA's Rat Care fact sheet at spca.bc.ca/AnimalCare for more information on rat care.

Wow! Rats can climb seemingly impossible vertical surfaces

Cool! Like tightrope walkers, rats can



Awesome! Rats cannot only swim for kilometres but can also hold their breath and swim under water.

may see him sniff the air to detect the intruder and he will likely freeze, like a rabbit, listening to assess the threat.

Neat! Rats are very clean animals, spending lots of time grooming themselves and other rats in the colony.

Rat Jungle Gym



Create an interesting habitat for your rats. This is an old birdcage that has been converted into a "rat condo." Try and get the largest enclosure you can with vertical space.

Get cardboard tubes from a carpet store

Add some ropes for climbing

Make a hammock from an old dishrag

Use scraps of wood and cardboard to make platforms and a nesting area

Add some toilet paper hay bales, food dishes and a water bottle

String cheerios on pipe-cleaners



TALE OF A TAIL

A rat's tail is amazing and is not just used for **balancing**.

A rat's tail is covered with **scales** and **fine hairs** that help grip vines, branches and ropes making it possible for rats to **climb almost anything**.

The tail also helps **regulate** the rat's body temperature. The tail makes up 5% of a rat's surface area but can dissipate 17% of a rat's body heat. Rats use their tails to regulate their temperature by controlling the flow of blood through their tail – **pumping more blood to cool themselves and less blood to stay warm**. Wow! A built in air-conditioner. No wonder rats can adapt to virtually any climate and live just about everywhere in the world.

RATS SENSES!

Smell – Their keenest sense; helps to identify food sources and distinguish between family members – including you!

Eyesight – Poor; common with animals that feed at dawn and dusk.

Taste – Acute; they can detect when there may be even a trace of poison in food.

Hearing – Excellent; can make and hear sounds beyond the range of humans.

Touch – Whiskers and soft skin on their feet help rats feel their way in darkness.

like brick buildings and drain pipes to get up onto roofs.

walk along ropes or even power lines.



Smart! Rats are intelligent, quick thinking animals that have allowed them to survive catastrophes – floods, famines, fires, even exterminations – where other animals have perished.