



# 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. (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 just might surprise you.**



PHOTO: OLEG KOZLOV/ISTOCK

## Rat Stats

- Origin:** Asia
- Status:** Began to be domesticated nearly 200 years ago
- Life Span:** Usually 2 to 3 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” (coloured spots on white)

# Be a rat-tastic guardian!

Rats make great companions for guardians who can give them plenty of attention.

Here are just some of the care and welfare needs of rats. The pet care section of the BC SPCA website - [sPCA.bc.ca](http://sPCA.bc.ca) - has more rat care tips.



## Healthy, happy rats

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! Foods such as unsweetened cereals, seeds, plain popcorn, nuts and dried pasta make great snacks. Just don't feed them too many or you'll end up with fat, unhealthy rats.



PHOTO: ASHLEY DARLING

## 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. You can also use a corner litter pan designed for small animals.

## 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.



## On the menu

Being omnivores, rats eat both plant and animal foods. Feed your rats a staple diet of rat pellets or blocks. Rat pellets are a complete, balanced diet and should be available to them all the time. Provide a small amount of vegetables and fruits every day, too. Rats crave variety!



## 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. Scatter or hang nesting material - like shredded paper - for your rats to gather.

## 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. Keep in mind, a rat can squeeze through any opening she can get her head through! Rat-proofing is key. Always supervise playtime.



PHOTO: ASHLEY DARLING

## Rat palace

Rats are active animals requiring a large habitat. The more space, the better! Rats like to climb so a tall enclosure with multiple levels is best. A cage measuring three feet long by two feet wide by four feet high (pictured here) works well for a pair or small group of rats. 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 12 litters in just one year, with anywhere from six to 12 young per litter.



## A clean, comfy home

Bedding made from recycled paper or fleece fabric works well for rats. Do not use cedar, pine or aspen wood 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 loud noises and bright lights. Rats like darkness!



## 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.

## Social life

Rats 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 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 branches. 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.





Ian hasta have his pasta!

## RECIPES FOR RATS

Rats are fun to feed because they clearly take such pleasure in eating! Things like cooked rice, plain oatmeal, scrambled egg and cooked pasta 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!

### Piñata party

Make a "piñata" for your rats by wrapping a spoonful of treats in several layers of paper towel. Tie the bundle closed with some string. Hang it high enough in their cage so that it can swing freely and your rats can just reach it by standing up on their hind legs.



### Tunnelling for treats

Rats are natural burrowers. Fill a large plastic container with plain 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.



David makes bobbing for peas look easy peasy!

## Resourceful rats

This booklet provides basic care information. Please visit [spca.bc.ca/petcare](http://spca.bc.ca/petcare) for more rat care tips. You can also sniff out these other great rat resources:

**The Dapper Rat**  
[dapper.com.au](http://dapper.com.au)

**Rats Rule**  
[ratsrule.com](http://ratsrule.com)

**Rat Behavior and Biology**  
[ratbehavior.org](http://ratbehavior.org)



## 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 scared, frustrated, bored or depressed;
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/petcare](http://spca.bc.ca/petcare).

