

RAT CARE GUIDE

For the Brilliant, Whiskered Roommate Who Works the Night Shift

Bay Area Bird & Exotics Hospital

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Domestic rats are intelligent, social, and affectionate mammals that form real bonds with their people. They are curious, active, and mostly nocturnal — their peak productivity often begins just as you are heading to bed. Proper housing, nutrition, enrichment, and veterinary care are what stand between a thriving rat and a sick one.



ABOUT YOUR RAT

- Domestic rats descend from the Norway rat, **Rattus norvegicus**, and are fully domesticated companions — not rescues from the wild, not a compromise
- They rely heavily on scent and whiskers for sensory input and are remarkably intelligent problem-solvers
- With proper care, rats develop deep bonds with their caregivers and become interactive, affectionate members of the household
- They are also highly social — a lonely rat is not a happy rat



HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT

- Minimum enclosure size: **24" × 24" × 14"** — though larger is always better and vertical climbing space is strongly encouraged
- Escape-proof, easy-to-clean materials — if there is a gap, they will find it
- Solid plastic or metal flooring only — **no wire floors or wire ramps**, which cause foot injuries
- Include a hide box or hammock for sleeping — rats need a space that feels secure
- Allow space for nesting, burrowing, and exercise — all three are necessary, not optional

Parameter	Target
Room temperature	65–80°F
Humidity	40–70%
Maximum safe temperature	Below 85°F — above this is dangerous

- Clean the enclosure thoroughly **at least weekly** — if you can smell ammonia at cage level, it needed cleaning sooner
- Ammonia buildup from waste directly contributes to respiratory disease — ventilation and cleanliness are not optional

Safe bedding options:

- Shredded paper (non-inked), recycled paper products, aspen, or fleece
- **Never use pine, cedar, or corn cob** bedding — respiratory irritation risk is well documented



NUTRITION

- Rats are omnivores — feed a high-quality pelleted diet formulated specifically for rats, such as **Oxbow** or **Mazuri**
- Pellets (rat blocks) can be offered free choice — they are not prone to overeating their base diet
- Fresh vegetables and small portions of fruit may be offered daily for enrichment and variety
- Tree nuts (almonds, walnuts, pecans, Brazil nuts) may be offered sparingly as occasional treats
- Avoid foods high in sugar and fat — obesity is a real and preventable problem in rats

Always Offer	Offer in Moderation	Always Avoid
High-quality rat pellets (free choice)	Fresh vegetables daily	Sugary or high-fat processed foods
Fresh water at all times	Small portions of fruit	Pine or cedar shavings (bedding)
	Tree nuts (occasional treat)	Sticky foods that could cause choking

- Fresh water via a drinking bottle at all times — clean and refill **at least twice weekly** and verify the sipper tube is functioning



SOCIAL NEEDS & ENRICHMENT

- Rats are highly social and do best in same-sex or neutered **pairs or small groups** — a single rat requires significantly more daily interaction
- Provide **at least 30 minutes** of supervised out-of-cage playtime daily — this is not negotiable for a single rat
- Rats are mostly nocturnal and prefer full darkness at night — avoid constant light exposure or nightlights
- Handle gently but confidently, supporting the body fully — most rats are very tolerant and rarely bite unless frightened

Good enrichment items:

- Tunnels and hiding structures
- Climbing toys and platforms
- Solid exercise wheels (no wire rungs)
- Chew sticks and untreated hardwood branches
- Ink-free cardboard for shredding and nesting



MONITORING HEALTH AT HOME

- Normal fecal pellets are oval, firm, and slightly moist — deviations from this are worth noting
 - Hard, dry, or unusually small stools may indicate dehydration or constipation
 - Soft or loose stools may indicate illness or dietary imbalance

Contact us if you notice any of the following:

- Sneezing, labored breathing, or clicking sounds when breathing

- Red discharge around the eyes or nose (porphyrin staining — looks like blood, isn't always, but always warrants attention)
- Lethargy or significant changes in activity level
- Weight loss or reduced appetite
- Lumps, bumps, or swellings anywhere on the body

Common Health Concern	Notes
Respiratory disease	The most common health issue in rats — closely tied to bedding, ventilation, and ammonia levels
Mammary tumors	Very common, especially in females — often benign but require veterinary evaluation
Pituitary tumors	Neurological signs including head tilt, weakness, seizures
Dental issues	Overgrown or misaligned teeth can prevent eating
Heart disease	More common in older rats — labored breathing, reduced activity
Skin infections	Often secondary to scratching or injury
Kidney disease	Linked to age and diet — weight loss, increased drinking

VETERINARY CARE

- Annual veterinary examinations are recommended for all rats — rats age quickly and annual is the minimum, not the ceiling
- Early intervention significantly improves outcomes — by the time a rat looks sick, it has often been sick for a while
- Rats have a lifespan of approximately 2–3 years — every wellness visit matters

If your rat is sneezing frequently, breathing with effort, losing weight, developing lumps, or seems suddenly lethargic — call us. Don't wait. Rats decline quickly and early treatment makes a real difference.

Questions? We've heard weirder ones. Call us.

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