

## HOUSING

Place your pet's cage away from drafts and direct sunlight and out of reach of other household pets. Select as large a cage as possible. A solid bottom is best, as mesh can irritate your pet's feet. Wire cages, aquariums and plastic cages are all available. Plastic cages full of tubes and tunnels look like fun, but lack ventilation and a determined rodent can easily gnaw right through. Aquariums are easy to clean but require a top with adequate ventilation. Horizontal bars on a wire cage offer plenty of climbing fun.

The minimum size cage for a mouse is 18 inches long x 12 inches wide x 12 inches high. For each additional mouse, increase the floor area by half a square foot. The bars on a wire cage should be no more than 1/4 inch apart—mice can squeeze through very small places. Rats will need a larger cage, a minimum of 20 inches long x 14 inches wide x 24 inches high. The floor area will need to be increased one square foot for each additional rat. Bars should be no more than one inch apart. If your rats are very young, you may want to select a cage with narrower spacing.

Line the bottom of the cage with any safe bedding. You can shred sheets of plain white paper or purchase shavings. Your rat or mouse will appreciate a hiding house such as an old cardboard box, which also doubles as a gnawing object. Shred white, unscented tissues to provide nesting material. Offer food in a sturdy ceramic dish and water in a sipper bottle.

Rats and mice love to play, so provide plenty of toys, such as old tissue boxes, paper rolls, tunnels, ropes and ladders or an exercise wheel. Any wheel must have a solid running surface; your pet's foot or tail could get caught between rungs. Commercial gnaws or twigs from a pesticide-free beech, maple or fruit tree will help keep your pet's teeth properly worn down.

Remove soiled litter and clean the sipper bottle and food dish daily. Wash and disinfect the cage at least once a week. Always rinse and dry the cage well before adding clean bedding and returning your pet.

## DIET

Pellets, blocks and mixes are available for both rats and mice. Mixes tend to be high in fatty foods, so the best choice is formulated pellets or blocks supplemented by fresh fruit and vegetables and occasional treats, such as nuts, seeds and cheese. Rats are prone to obesity, so limit treats. Never offer food containing chocolate or caffeine. Fresh water should be available at all times.

## HEALTH

Find a veterinarian specializing in exotic animals and experienced in treating rats or mice before you have an emergency. Rats and mice can sometimes become infested with mites and other parasites. If your pet is scratching, consult your veterinarian. If your rat or mouse is not eating or drinking, has diarrhea, is sniffing or sneezing, has lumps anywhere on the body, is breathing laboriously, is lethargic, has a noticeable head tilt, or your pet's coat seems rough, see a veterinarian immediately.

## FERTILITY

Rats become sexually mature at six to ten weeks, mice at six to seven weeks. A rat's gestation period (pregnancy) is only 20 to 22 days, with litters from 6 to 16! A mouse's gestation is 19 to 21 days, with litters between 8 and 12. Because rats and mice are so prolific, breeding them is strongly discouraged. Determine the sex of each pet, and keep males and females separate. Males and females should be separated before birthing, as they will mate within 12 hours of giving birth.

# A QUICK GUIDE TO RATS AND MICE



Despite the reputation of their wild cousins, pet rats and mice can be delightful members of your household. Friendly and intelligent, rats are the most responsive of the small rodents, making them ideal pets for children. Mice will not be quite so eager for your company, but watching them scamper can provide hours of enjoyment. Both rats and mice are highly social animals, happiest when sharing their habitat with another of their kind. Mice generally live between two and three years. Rats have a slightly longer life span, averaging two to four years.

Before adopting a pet rat or mouse, consider the following:

- Rats and mice need nutritious food, fresh water and a clean habitat daily.
- Rats and mice need daily play and interaction.
- All household members should understand how to hold and play with a rat or mouse and be as eager as you are to welcome this new pet into the family.

## SETTING UP HOUSE

### Essential items

- Spacious cage with solid, deep bottom
- Shavings
- Ceramic food dish
- Water bottle
- Formulated rat or mouse food
- Nesting box
- Gnawing objects

**Rats and mice  
make great pets!**

### Optional items

- Nesting material
- Toys
- Exercise wheel (no rungs or spokes!)
- Travel cage

## GENERAL CARE

Rats enjoy supervised time outside their cage to play and explore. Make a room safe by preventing access to electrical cords, blocking gaps under appliances and furniture, removing hazardous items and removing any other pets. Rats do not get along well with other animals. Mice will also enjoy an occasional romp outside the cage but must be supervised even more closely. Their small size makes escape more likely and, unlike rats, escaped mice are likely to fend for themselves in the house rather than returning to their cage.

## ONE OR TWO?

Rats and mice are both social animals and will be happiest in the company of another of their kind. If possible, adopt a pair of the same sex. Animals from the same litter or that have been raised together since young will be most likely to get along. Two female mice are more likely to get along than two males, but male rats introduced at a young age can make happy cage mates.



## HANDLING

With gentle care, most rats bond strongly with their humans and enjoy being stroked and held. Let your rat become gradually accustomed to your presence. Start by letting your pet sniff your hand and progress to hand feeding treats. Always approach your rat slowly, being careful not to startle. Pick up your rat by gently enclosing your pet's whole body with your hand. Support all four feet with your other hand. Some rats like to scamper up your arm and perch on your shoulder.

Mice are generally not as fond of handling, but with patience mice can become quite tame. Give your mice plenty of time to become used to your presence before trying to pick them up. Pick up a mouse as you would a rat or gently scoop the mouse up in your hand. When holding or carrying a mouse, cup your pet with one hand and hold the other over the back. A short fall could cause serious injury.

**MORE INFORMATION**  
The Rat and Mouse Club of America  
(<http://www.rmca.org>)

*Please support the animals in our community.*



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