

# Pet

# Rats

# &

# Mice



## The General Care of Pet Rats and Mice

By Karen Robbins

### GENERAL

Rats and mice in the wild can be one of the worst pests for mankind, notwithstanding their indispensable part within the ecosystem. Domestic rats and mice, on the other hand, contribute a great deal to the advancement of research for the benefit of man. Domestic rats and mice are not the same as their wild counterparts, having been domesticated for over 100 years. Rats and mice AS PETS suffer from bad “press” with much prejudice and misunderstanding directed toward them.



Drawing by Sheryl Leisure.

As urban sprawl continues to limit the necessary space needed to keep dogs and cats, rats and mice as pets are gradually emerging as an ideal substitute. Easy to keep, with minimal space and care requirements, they provide all the pleasure and satisfaction of a warm, cuddly, intelligent, and friendly pet companion. They are also very inexpensive to obtain along with the required accessories needed to make them happy.

Domesticated rats make excellent pets for children and adults alike. They are highly intelligent (being the most used in studies for intelligence and psychology research), clean, and very sociable. They interact with their owners the same as dogs and cats do and may be easily trained. Although rodents are nocturnal (sleeping during the day and active at night), rats will quickly learn to adjust their schedule and be ready to come out and play when you get home from school or work. Pet rats and mice require no vaccinations and carry no diseases. The Plague of the fourteenth century Europe was caused by the *flea* carried by the rat and other species of animals including man. Because of the rats close proximity to man throughout history, they have been unfairly blamed for this catastrophe. They also do not make any noise nor need to be walked every day (although they love to go out with you when you visit friends!). Watching mice play can be a lot of fun. They are great stress reducers and are equivalent to having a tank of fish.

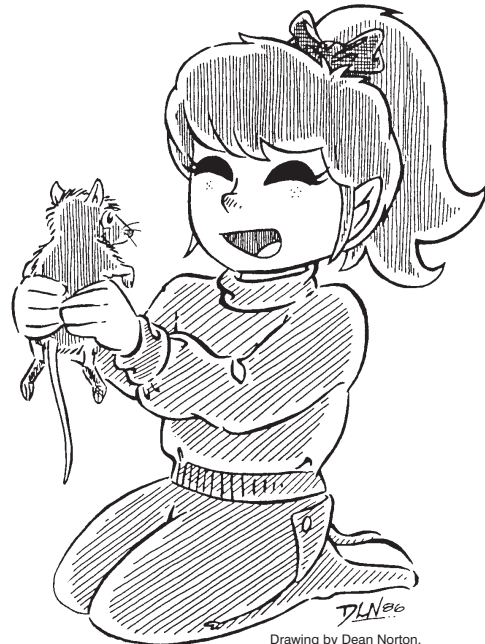
Once a person understands that rats and mice bite rarely and then out of fear and not anger, and learns how easy it is to handle and care for them, master and pet are about to begin a most delightful relationship. Occasionally a mother protecting her babies, fingers poked in through the wire, or fingers that smell like food are about the only instances when a rat may bite. Remembering these things and taking precautions such as washing your hands before reaching in

for your pet and being careful around a mother rat will ensure a safe experience.

Rats and mice are rodents belonging to the gnawing family. Their teeth grow continuously throughout their life and, therefore, the animal must constantly keep them worn down by chewing on things. Because of this, rats should not be left to run loose in the house as they can chew on things such as electrical cords, furniture, bedding, etc.

### CHOOSING YOUR PET

There is no preference to sex in rats as to one being a better companion to you than the other. Males do get larger than the females and will tend to be lazier and more laid back when they grow up. Females will still have the playful ten-

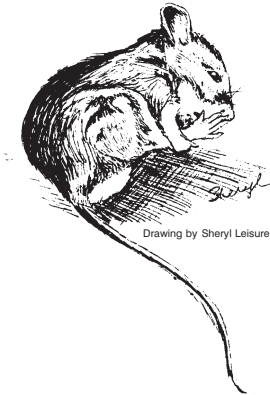


Drawing by Dean Norton.

dencies when they mature. Male rats do have a tendency to “urine mark” their territory, although many females will do the same thing. Rats will not have any odor other than a natural perfumy scent (like sandalwood) that is pleasant to smell. If your pet smells, it is an indication that the cage is not being cleaned often enough. You may give your rat an occasional bath (especially the males as some tend to get a yellow skin on the back and have more of an oily coat). Both rats and mice will wash themselves like cats do and you will see them constantly grooming themselves and each other. They’re also clean in their housekeeping, usually urinating in one corner of the cage. Female mice are preferred by many be-

cause they do not have the “musky” odor that is natural for male mice.

When choosing your pet, the most important things to look for are health and personality. Some signs that indicate ill health are sneezing, wheezing, rattling, thin condition, ruffled stand-up coat, hunched posture, listlessness, discharge from the eyes or nose, diarrhea, bloated belly (not from being pregnant), and cuts or open wounds. A healthy rat or mouse will be curious, active, have a sleek, glossy coat, and be in good body weight. Pick out an animal that is



Drawing by Sheryl Leisure.

curious and inquisitive when you put your hand in the cage and seems friendly towards you. They should be calm and friendly when you pick them up. Any prospective pet should never bite. Baby rats will nibble on your fingers and this should not be confused with biting. If you find a rat that “kisses” (licks), you have found yourself a very special friend. Try to buy from a reputable pet shop or breeder that knows their animals, has healthy stock, and plays with the youngsters from birth to socialize them to people. The best age to obtain your future pet is at the age of 5–8 weeks (mice), 6–9 weeks (rats) (females older than 6 weeks may be pregnant if housed in community cages) so they grow up with you.

The average life span of rats is 2–3 years; mice 1–2 years. The average body length of adult rats is 9–11 inches; mice 3–4 inches; with an average tail length of 7–9 inches in rats and 3–4 inches in mice. The average body weight for rats is 350–450 grams for a female, 450–650 grams for a male; mice 30 grams each sex. There have been a few adult male rats that weighed 2 pounds!

***Meeting the basic needs of a pet rat or mouse is neither complicated, time consuming nor expensive.***

### **COMPANIONSHIP**

In their natural state, rats and mice are sociable members of colonies. Therefore, keeping two instead of one will meet their need to play and interact with their own kind. They should be of the same sex (except for male mice as they will fight), unless you have plenty of friends willing to adopt a continuous supply of new babies!

Rats and mice, although looking very similar except for size, cannot be housed with each other or other species of rodents. Rats can learn to get along with other family pets such as dogs and cats, but care should be given when introducing

them. Don't stress your pets by trying to get them to get along if they are clearly frightened. Any time spent together should always be supervised. There are many instances where a rat and a dog or cat are the best of friends. Mice on the other hand are too easy for most cats to grab for a snack and, therefore, should not be put together.

### **HOUSING**

A simple, gnaw-proof cage, terrarium, or screen-topped aquarium of sufficient size is the basic requirement. Used aquariums may be obtained at garage sales and swap meets for an inexpensive price but are breakable and can be heavy. Wire cages can be too drafty, allow the bedding to fall out, are harder to clean and disinfect, and corrode after long exposure to urine. (The new powder-coated wire rat cages with solid metal shelves and plastic cat pan bottom are easier to clean, and the rats love the levels to climb on.) If wire shelves are used in the cage for the animals to climb on, they should be made of ½ by ½ inch wire as a rat's back foot can get caught in 1 by ½ inch wire and break a leg. Solid shelves need to be wiped down twice a day so the rats don't get dirty or develop sores. For two small rats, use a 15–20-long gallon tank or 14x24x18 (approximate) wire cage (minimum sizes; preferably larger) for their housing. Two female mice may be housed in a 10 gallon tank, one male mouse in a 5–10 gallon tank—this will provide adequate room for a house, wheel, feed dish, and water bottle. If you have several female mice, then try to get the largest tank you can and have fun creating a playground for them. Watching them will give you hours of entertainment! The cage should be placed either on a table, dresser, or shelf (not above eye level!), away from direct sun or drafts. Extreme temperatures should be avoided.

### **BEDDING**

***NO cedar or pine as they contain toxins and cause organ damage and respiratory disease.*** Use hardwood shavings (aspen chips, flakes, shredded), paper products, pelleted beddings made from hardwood, paper, or other non-toxic substances, or any other non-toxic bedding (see Bedding Products table next page). Fill the cage with ½–1 inch of bedding at each cleaning.

### **ACCESSORIES**

A demand-type **water bottle** to provide clean water at all times. A dish may be used only in emergencies as your pet will immediately spill the water or push shavings in it. Holders with chew guards for the water bottle are available to hang the bottle inside an aquarium. If you use a **feed dish**, it should be easy to clean and sturdy to prevent tipping. **Sleeping boxes** can be made from a variety of non-toxic household containers (washable or disposable): butter cups, jars, oatmeal cartons, etc., or store bought houses. **Nesting material** will most often be used by mice. This can be shredded napkins, etc. If you have access to fresh, clean hay, your mice will love this as nesting material. You can also get LARGE PVC pipe pieces (elbows, Y's, straight tubes) for your rats to play in. **Exercise wheels** provide plenty of exer-

**Bedding Products (see more at [www.afрма.org/afmalinkspetprod.htm#petprodbn](http://www.afрма.org/afmalinkspetprod.htm#petprodbn)):**

Hardwood Products			
Product	Manufacturer	Phone Number	Web Site
Sani-Chips®	P.J. Murphy Forest Products Corp.	1-800-631-1936	www.pjmurphy.net
Aspen Shavings Aspen Chip®	Northeastern Products Corp.	1-800-873-8233	www.labbedding.com/labbedding.html
Shredded Aspen	Harlan	1-800-4-TEKLAD	www.harlan.com
Aspen Shavings Aspen Chips	Diamond Star Wood Shavings	1-800-235-0561	
PetsPick™ Premier Pet™	American Wood Fibers, Inc.	1-800-624-9663	www.awf.com
Paper Products			
CareFRESH™ CareFRESH® Ultra™ Healthy Pet™	Healthy Pet	1-800-242-2287	http://healthy-pet.com/ or www.carefresh.com/
Critter Chips/Critter Strips	AirLite Animal Bedding	1-888-838-3772	www.airliteusa.com
Enrich-n'Pure™ Enrich-n'Nest™	The Andersons	(866) 234-0505 x6511	www.andersonslabbedding.com
Eco-Bedding™	Fibercore, LLC	(800) 658-6150	www.fibercorellc.com
ALPHA-dri® Cellu-Dri™	Shepherd Specialty Papers	1-800-382-5001	www.ssponline.com
TEK-FRESH	Harlan	1-800-4-TEKLAD	www.harlan.com
Pet's Preference	Stutzman Environmental Products	1-888-877-7665	www.stutzman-environmental.com
Paper Shavings	Resourceful Paper, Inc.	1-866-353-1710	www.papershavings.com/pet_bedding.php
Pelleted Products			
Gentle Touch™ (aspen bark)	Gentle Touch Products	(402) 332-0253	www.gentletouchproducts.com
Aspen Supreme™ (aspen bark)	Green Pet Products	1-800-405-6378	www.greenpet.com
Critter Country (winter wheat grass and other fibers)	Mt. Meadows Pet Products, Inc.	1-800-752-8864	www.mtnmeadowspet.com
Eco-Straw Litter (straw)	Oxbow Animal Health	1-800-249-0366	www.oxbowanimalhealth.com
PAPERCHIP® (recycled newspaper)	Shepherd Specialty Papers	1-800-382-5001	www.ssponline.com
Yesterdays News® (recycled newspaper)	Nestlé Purina Company	1-800-778-1205	www.yesterdaysnews.com
Crown Animal Bedding Pet's Preference	Stutzman Environmental Products	1-888-877-7665	www.stutzman-environmental.com
Pel-o-Cobs® (corn cob)	The Andersons	(866) 234-0505 x6511	www.andersonslabbedding.com
Cell Sorb Plus™ (recycled paper)	Fangman Specialties, Inc.	1-888-247-3993	
Litter Lite™ (cellulose paper by-product)	Wysong Corporation	1-800-748-0188	www.wysong.net/
Critter Litter (oat hulls)	Da-Mars Equipment Co.	1-800-95-BUNNY	

cise and fun. If you get a wheel for your rat, it needs to be at least 12–14 inches in diameter and a cage large enough to accommodate it (female rats should always have a wheel). Wooden gnawing blocks are great **chew toys**. Rawhide chew sticks or hard dog biscuits can also be used. Cooked soup bones are a favorite of rats.

**NUTRITION**

Food needs to be kept available at all times. Laboratory pellets (Lab Blox, Rodent Chow, Pet Blocks, etc.) are the best basic main diet. You can find them in pet shops or feed stores bagged in small quantities. There are now many places on the Internet that sell the lab-quality formulas, e.g. the Harlan Teklad 2018 formula is sold online as “Native Earth 4018.” Also, AFRMA sells lab blocks at our shows and on our online Sales Catalog. If you are unable to get lab pellets (you may have to ask the store owner or manager if they can get them if not normally stocked), then a high qual-

ity dog food (not over 8% fat content) from the pet shop/feed store such as Nutro, Science Diet, Iams, etc., fed equally with a rat/mouse grain mixture is a good substitute. Complement either diet with small amounts of salad greens (clean, freshly washed, non-contaminated or sprayed, dandelion leaves can be a treat for mice), fresh fruits (rats love bananas, also avocado given in small amounts) and vegetables



Drawing by Sheryl Leisure.

(raw broccoli and corn-on-the-cob are a favorite with rats) (NOTE: any fresh foods should be washed when necessary), and whole wheat bread. Be sure to clean out any uneaten fresh foods the next day. Be sparing with oily seeds, nuts, and grain mixes. Dry cat food should only be given to growing youngsters or nursing mothers because of the high fat and protein content. **DO NOT** give your pet treats such as candy (chocolate can't be digested by rats), cookies, potato chips, or other junk food. Treats such as dry, healthy, low-sugar cereals (Cheerios, puffed wheat/rice/millet, spoon-size shredded wheat, etc.), plain popcorn, wild bird seed, dry oatmeal, occasional table scraps such as veggies, salad, spaghetti, etc., are okay and will be eagerly devoured by your pet. Do not feed your pet through the screen top of the cage (if the screen is large enough to do this), or if you use wire rat cages, through the bars of the cage, as they will learn that things poked in are food and grab anything poked in, including your finger.

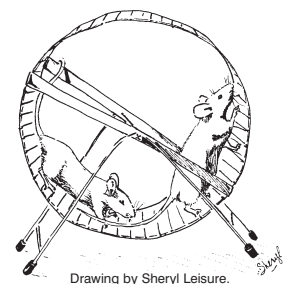
**SANITATION**

Cleanliness is the best guarantee to keep your pet in good health. Clean the feed dish daily, the water bottle at each re-fill. Change bedding every 3–5 days and clean and disinfect the cage and accessories once a week.

**TOYS**

**RATS:** Boxes, ladders, shelves, large cardboard/PVC tubes, wooden bird toys, hammocks, wheels, etc.

**MICE:** Cardboard toilet paper/paper towel tubes, ladders, wheels, houses, etc.



Drawing by Sheryl Leisure.

**TRAINING**

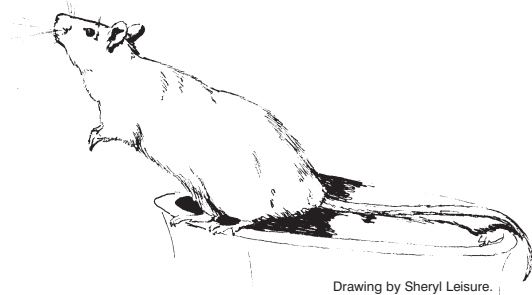
Rats can be taught their name, to come, and other things. They have also been taught to play basketball, do “Rat Olympics,” and perform complicated mazes with many intricate maneuvers.

Allow your new pet about one week to become adjusted to his new home and family members. Hand feed your new pet as much as possible for the first few days. This means that every time you handle or approach your pet, it will have a positive reward waiting from you. Start with placing your hand inside the cage and letting your pet approach on its own, smelling and walking around. Be gentle and talk softly to it. Don't be surprised if it doesn't take the food right away. Sometimes you may have to leave your hand in the cage for several minutes, but eventually your pet will come to you. The next step is holding your treat just outside the cage so that your pet must reach out and get it.

To teach your rat his name, call him by name whenever you take him out to play and give a treat such as a Cheerio. Rats also respond to a raspberry/kissy/tsk sound, and you may do this each time you call your pet. Hand him the Cheerio the first couple of times and after that say, "Timmy, come," and hold the Cheerio a little bit away, increasing the distance each time and your rat will not only learn his name, but also "Come"! Remember to give a treat when he comes to you! Each time you end a training session, your rat should have gone a little farther than before. Eventually when you make your noise or call his name, your rat will try to go to you wherever you are. At this point, it is best not to reward with food every time, but trade off with lots of hugs and kisses.

Rats will soon learn to shoulder sit and make that their second home when out with you. This is useful if you plan to take your rat with you to different places. Some people also use a hip-pack to put their rat in when visiting friends. Place your rat on your shoulder for short amounts of time at first; you can try giving small treats while he is there. Sit quietly by his cage in the beginning and gradually increase the time he spends on your shoulder. After a few days you can start walking around a little with him. When he is comfortable, then you can start taking him places with you!

You can also do something like this with your pet mouse, but instead of your shoulder, use a pocket!

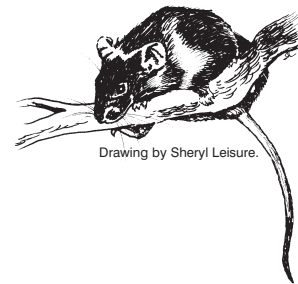


Your rat will also housebreak himself if you don't keep him out too long at a time. If he starts to fidget and get nervous, it's a good indication he needs to potty. Place him back in his cage; after he relieves himself give him a treat. Many rats have been known to housebreak themselves without any training.

Some rats will not eat a treat while out with you, preferring instead to eat in their cage. Don't be offended if your rat is this way. When they feel completely safe and secure, then they will eat while out of their cage. Others will take their treat and run to their cage, drop it, and come back for more!

Some are natural pack rats and will try to steal just about anything and hoard in their nest. Some people have found many unusual items stashed in their rat's cage, or hiding place because they were allowed to run loose in the house. Remember, they should always be supervised when let out to run in the house. Not only will they find things to chew on they should not, they could get stepped on by an unsuspecting person.

They should be thoroughly socialized and trained so they won't become frightened when let out on the floor for the first time. Sit on the floor with the rat in your lap and he will naturally want to explore the surrounding area. As he gets braver he will wander farther from you, but if something startles him, he will come running back to the safety of your lap! It is a good idea to just confine their play area to a bed, couch or chair. Mice should not be allowed on the floor as they become too easily frightened and will try to run to a safe hiding place.



### **FANCY RATS & MICE**

Rats and mice come in a whole rainbow of colors and coat types. Many of the colors and coat types are only recent developments of fanciers around the world. There is no one color or marking that makes a better pet. However, the English mice are naturally calmer than the American mice.

Some of the more exotic colors and markings in Rats are Siamese, Blue, Silver Black, Silver Fawn, Lilac, Cinnamon, Black-eyed White, Cinnamon Pearl, Lynx, Chinchilla, Silver Lilac, Blue Point Siamese, Capped, Variegated, and Blaze. Rex rats have a curly coat, Tailless are born with no tails, and Hairless have no fur! Most rats that you find in the pet shops are Hooded, Self (all one solid color), and Irish/Berkshire (solid color top with white on the belly) in Agouti (brown, the color most often seen in the wild rats and mice), Fawn (looks orange with dark eyes), Beige (tan with dark eyes), Black, and Pink-eyed White (albino).

Some of the fancier colors, markings, and coat types in Mice are Fawn/Orange, Beige, Coffee (a darker version of Beige), Cream, Silver, Siamese/Himalayan, Silver Black/Silver Grey, Dutch (marked like a Dutch rabbit), Variegated (small splashes over the entire body), and Spotted Tan (sometimes confused as being Tri-color) in Satin (very shiny), Long Haired, Frizzie (curly coat), Hairless, or a combination of the above.

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*For more information, contact the American Fancy Rat and Mouse Association, 9230 64th St., Riverside, CA 92509-5924*  
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