



Choosing Your New Pet Rats...

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Ideally you should purchase your new pets from a reputable breeder rather than a pet shop. The biggest complaint AFRMA receives from new rat owners is that they got their rats from a pet shop and they are sick which usually requires veterinarian care.

The person that will own the rats should be the one to pick them out. The new owner should handle each rat and see how they react to her or him. Rats will choose their owner and react differently to each person—with one person they will be very fidgety, not want to be in the hands, and try to get away, whereas you can give the same rat to another person and they settle right down and end up washing their face after a few minutes. If they give kisses (lick the person), that means they *really* like that person. Some rats will give kisses to anyone, but others just do it to their special people.

You should handle each rat for several minutes to see how they react and respond to you. If they will sit in your hands and wash their faces, or sit on your shoulder and be curious of the surroundings, that means they are very comfortable with you. It will take several minutes of handling the rats to find the special ones for you. Some breeders won't sell rats to single-rat homes. They are extremely social animals and need a same-sex buddy so you should always buy at least two. They won't become any less attached to their new owner because of their buddy.

Feeding Guidelines

Main Diet:

Rats will eat anything, but that doesn't mean they should be fed anything. Some things can be potentially harmful to them. They should be fed free choice (available all the time) a high-quality lab block as the main diet. Lab blocks are a balanced diet that has everything in them for the rats. It's the same concept as feeding a dog the dry dog kibble as opposed to

buying the meat, grains, veggies, vitamins, and cooking it all up for them.

Treats:

Treats should be no more than 10% of the diet. The treats should be healthy things like fresh washed raw vegetables (broccoli head or stem, kale, carrots, etc.), raw fruit (bananas, apples, grapes, etc.), healthy breads (super healthy whole wheat, seeded grain breads, etc.), healthy cereals (low sugar, low salt) like Shredded Wheat, Cheerios, etc., or the puffed cereals (puffed millet, puffed rice, etc.). Of course organic cereals that are fruit juice sweetened instead of sugar sweetened or has no sugar at all would be best. You can also give your pets the organic plain rice/millet cakes, healthy table scraps, etc. They love bites of spaghetti with sauce, leftover rib bones, baked potato skins (with no butter/sour cream though—they don't need this extra fat), etc.

It's best when you purchase your rats to find out what they had been fed (brand of lab blocks, kinds of treats, etc.) and try to get the same food and slowly transition them over to your food if necessary. Most breeders will sell you the lab blocks they use so you can purchase your food from them for the life of the rats. Some rats will like certain kinds of treats and not others, so it is a matter of giving it to them to see if they like it. If the rats came from a pet shop, you will probably not be able to find out what kind of food they were raised on by the breeder.

Some breeders don't feed grain/seed mixes and don't recommend them to the people that buy rats from them. The grain/seed mixes are more of a treat than a main diet. With the grain/seed mixes, the rats will pick and choose what they like—eating the sunflower seeds, dog kibble, etc., first—and leave a lot behind which you then throw out. They don't get a very balanced diet this way and this kind of diet can lead to obesity and skin/coat problems. Also, too much of the seeds can cause some rats to break out in scabs. If anyone wants to feed a

seed mix as a treat, Reggie Rat is a mix made up special for rats that doesn't have all the fattening stuff in it. We find the rats will eat everything in this mix.

Nuts are too fattening, especially for females—too much fat in their diet can help develop tumors. We recommend sticking with the veggies/fruits/cereals/healthy table scraps.

Yogurt drops are the worst thing you can feed your pet rats—nothing but sugar and fat. They are better off with a piece of broccoli head/stem or a carrot.



Housing Your New Rats

Now on to getting your rats home. You should have a large aquarium or large wire cage (wire spaced no greater than ½ inch apart, any shelving should be solid shelves or ½ inch x ½ inch wire) with solid bottom. Some rats will get used to their new surroundings in a few days, others may take as long as a couple weeks.

You should not give your new rats boxes or hiding places for the first couple weeks. If a rat is timid and shy when they get to their new place, they will hide in a box or house and not get used to their surroundings very well. If you don't give them any place to hide, they will more quickly become used to the new surroundings, smells, sights, and sounds.

If they were in a breeding-size cage at the breeder's and you put them into a huge triple-deluxe cage three times the size of what they were living in, this can be overwhelming to some babies. If you have them in a large wire cage with multi levels, are they able to get up to the top where you can't reach them? Does the cage have doors that access all parts of the cage? If they are able to get away from you and you have to struggle to get to them or can't reach them, this will add to the timidity. If you have them in a large aquarium, they wouldn't be able to hide anywhere or get away from you.

The cage should be in an area where there is activity (such as a family room/living room) so they get used to everything. If your rats seem timid, whenever anyone goes by the cage have them talk to the rats and open the door and offer them a treat (putting it up to them to let them smell it if they won't come to you). If they won't take it, then leave the treat. They will soon associate anyone coming and visiting them with a tasty tidbit.



Bedding

The bedding should be paper such as CareFRESH™ or CareFRESH Ultra™ or aspen in the form of shavings, shredded, or flakes.

Handling

You should take them out and handle them at least a couple times a day—just don't take them out every few minutes if you got babies as they will still do a lot of sleeping at this age. Once they get used to your handling and come to you, then you can start taking them out and putting them on the bed or chair. If they don't know you very well and you put them on the bed, they won't associate you as their "safe place" in case something frightens them.

If you go to pick them up and they run and you let them go, you are training them to be timid. Try to pick them up on the first attempt (being gentle but firm) rather than them running from you several times until you can get them. Pick them up, hold, pet, and talk to them for several minutes until they calm down. This will go a lot farther toward them calming down than if you let them get away with being afraid. They will soon realize you won't hurt them. Also, if you take a couple steps away from the cage and turn so they can't see it, this should help. Once you handle them for several minutes until they calm down, are relaxed, and then put them back, they will then come to your hand saying, "That wasn't so bad, take me out again."

Of course, if you got them from a pet shop, you won't know how much, if any, handling they received before going to the pet shop. If they were never handled or socialized as babies, it will make your job harder.

Also, heredity plays a key factor in how nice a baby will be. If they are from friendly, nice animals, even if they aren't handled a lot as babies, the new owner's handling will bring out the personality of the rats. If they were bred from animals that have poor or unsteady temperaments or were from aggressive stock, they are more likely to have severe temperament problems.

Good luck picking out your new pet rats!

AFRMA

American Fancy Rat and Mouse Association

If you would like additional information or have further questions, contact the Association.

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