

Rat Care Sheet

The following is a short and simple guide to caring for rats. Little Whiskers Rattery of Washington highly recommends that you do additional research on rats, as not everything is covered in this guide. There are many helpful rat groups online, as well as many very informative websites. There will be a list of recommended links at the end of this guide. Happy reading!

Rats Are Great!

Rats are fantastic pets. I like to describe them as a combination of a cat and a dog, all wrapped up in an adorable small package. They are very intelligent; they learn their names, learn to preform tricks, learn to be litter trained, and so much more if you put the time into them!

Rats live approximately 2 - 2 ½ years which many find to be a very short lifespan. However, they are worth every moment! Unlike some small rodents, rats are awake during the day and night, usually mostly active in the morning and evening. They can learn your schedule, and will greet you eagerly much like a dog would. They love spending time with you!



Rats are social creatures, so it is vital that they have a rat friend! Even if you put a lot of time and care into your rats, they still need a friend their size to curl up with at the end of the day. They love to groom each other, play with each other, and sleep piled together. Taking care of 2-3 rats is not much more work than taking care of one, so there is no excuse not to get a pair or more. More rats equals more fun!

Most importantly: Make sure you have time and money to devote to your rat. You will need to play with them daily, take the time to clean their cage regularly, feed them daily, and provide fresh vegetables every couple of days. They will also need to be taken to the vet if they become ill. When it comes to vet bills, rats are not cheap. You must be sure you can afford your pets before you adopt. I suggest keeping an emergency fund set aside for vet visits. Call your vet and get some estimates so you know you have enough for unexpected respiratory issues or other illnesses. My personal vet is the Kitty Clinic in Lacey, WA. <http://kittyclinic.com/>

Housing

There is no such thing as too large of a cage for a rat. The general rule of thumb for cage size would be 2.5 cubic feet per rat. You can easily calculate this with the Ratty Corner Cage Calculator:

<http://www.rattycorner.com/odds/calc.shtml>

You will want to make sure that the bar spacing on any cage you get is no more than ½". Anything larger than this, and young rats and small females will easily escape the cage. You can get away with up to one inch bar spacing if you have large boys, but I suggest investing in something with smaller bars in case you have younger rats in the future.

I highly recommend buying a [Critter Nation](#) cage if possible, as I consider them to be the deluxe rat home of choice due to the quality of their construction and the ease of their use. I recommend ordering your Critter Nation through [Drs. Foster and Smith's](#) website. If that's not an option, [Martin's Cages](#) are also long lasting high-quality homes for your rats. You can find a cage at Petsmart or Petco, but the quality will not be the same. For a long term investment, I suggest buying a great cage that will last you for years, will be easy to clean, and make interaction with your rats easy and fun! Links to all of the websites listed above can be found at the end of this document.



Pictured: Single Critter Nation cage



Pictured: Martin's Cage R-695



Rats should NOT be kept in aquariums! No matter the size, aquariums do not provide adequate air flow, which is very important for the health of your rat. The ammonia from their own urine will gather in the tank, and can make your rat very ill. Please do not ever keep them in a tank! Every ethical breeder or rescue makes this a requirement before adoption.

Similarly, cages made out of plastic tubs can easily be chewed, and also offer poor air flow. However, they can make decent short-term travel cages and are often used when showing a rat.

Bedding

Do not use pine or cedar bedding in your cages! While they may look like a cheap option, they contain acids that damage the respiratory tract of your rat, and toxins that damage their liver. If not treated right away, respiratory issues in rats can often lead to severe lung damage and in worst case scenarios, lead to death.

Aspen is safe for rats if you want low cost bedding. I personally recommend shredded aspen. It does an excellent job with odors and it's softer than aspen chips. Paper pellet bedding such as *unscented* Yesterday's News cat litter makes great filler for litter pans as well. I don't recommend Carefresh bedding, as it can be quite dusty.

Rats can be litter trained, but they will never use the litter pans 100% of the time. For best results, add a "pee stone" to the litter pan. Smooth pond stones work really well and can be found almost anywhere. Rats like to urinate on stones, so this method helps encourage them to pee in the litter pan. Be sure to clean the stone with a vinegar and water solution and let it dry before placing it in the cage.



Pictured: Yesterday's News



Pictured: Shredded aspen

Food



*Pictured: Mazuri Rodent Food 6F Formula 5M30
Catalog #0001477*



Pictured: Oxbow Regal Rat Food, 3lb bag.



I have gone through several types of food in my many years of keeping rats. These are my top recommendations from personal experience. My preference is based on the health of my rats and the quality of their coat while on the food. I have included links and information about where to buy these foods at the end of this care sheet.

I prefer to feed my rats the 2014 Invigo Teklad diet, but it's not available to consumers anymore. RatsPacNW typically places one large order a year, so I stock up on as much as I can when they do. When we are out of 2014, I buy Mazuri Rodent Food (6F Formula 5M30 Catalog #0001477 - see photo on the left). It has 16% protein, which is good for both older and younger rats and is low in fat. I can't say it's my number one pick, but our rats do very well on it.

My second recommendation would be Oxbow Regal Rat Food. This is also a nutritionally complete food and works as a staple diet. It's easy to find this food in PetsMart, but I encourage buying a large 20lb bag online or locally to save yourself money in the long run.

Speaking of vegetables! You may not like to eat your vegetables, but your rats LOVE them! All of my babies are raised with fresh vegetables every other day or so. Sometimes more often. It's very easy to buy a few vegetables at the store, chop them up, put them in a dated gallon zip lock bag, and keep them in the fridge for a tasty treat! You can also give them fresh fruit; however, keep the sugar content in mind as rats do not need a lot of sugar. Much like with humans, too much sugar is bad for their health.

Rats can eat almost anything a person can. However, there are some forbidden foods. Here is a short list to keep in mind:

Forbidden Foods:

(Credit: <http://rattitude.com>)

- **Bitter Almond** – The bitter almond is a cousin to the sweet almond and contains traces of lethal prussic acid in its raw state. Although the toxicity is destroyed by heat, the sale of unrefined bitter almonds is prohibited in the United States.
- **Blue Cheese** – Contains mold toxic to rats.
- **Fats (from meats)** – Rats do not have gall bladders. Therefore, they do not have the enzymes needed to digest the fat from meat. (Credit to *spazrats*)
- **Green Bananas** – Inhibits starch digestion.
- **Green Potato Skins and Eyes** – Contains solanine, a toxin.
- **Licorice** – Contains a suspected neurotoxin.
- **Orange Juice** – May contain d-limonene, which can cause kidney cancer in male rats.
- **Poppy Seeds** – Can cause neurological damage, or may cause death!
- **Raw Artichokes** – Inhibits protein digestion.
- **Raw Bulk Tofu** – The bulk tofu mentioned on this list is what you find in health food stores soaking in a brine. Packaged tofu that you find in the supermarket is safe. Fermented bean products, like tofu, have properties that help prevent or diminish tumors in female rats.
- **Raw Dry Beans or Peanuts** – Contain anti-nutrients and causes red blood cell clumping. (Note: The peanuts that you buy in stores are almost always roasted and are therefore safe to eat. Frozen beans from veggie mixes are safe because they have been pre-cooked.)
- **Raw Onion** – Can lead to anemia and an upset stomach. Cooked onion in food can be safe in small quantities.
- **Raw Red Cabbage and Brussels Sprouts** – Contains an anti-nutrient that destroys thiamin. Safe in small amounts if cooked.
- **Raw Sweet Potato** – Contains cyanide-forming compounds. Safe in small amounts if cooked.
- **Rhubarb** – Contains high levels of oxalates which bind up calcium.
- **Wild Insects** – May carry parasites.

Foods to Feed with Caution:

(Credit: <http://rattitude.com>)

- **Apples** – Apples are fine, except for the seeds. Apple seeds contain a cyanide derivative that is deadly to rats.
- **Avocados** – Avocados are high in fat and are a good treat to feed rats that need to gain weight quickly (make sure the fruit is ripe!) However, the pit, rind, skin and leaves of avocados are toxic. The part of the fruit in contact with the pit has a higher concentration of toxins.
- **Carbonated Drinks** – Rats can't burp and release the accumulated gas.
- **Carob** – Contains vitamin A, B vitamins, and lots of protein. Carob pods have been used to treat diarrhea for centuries. Carob should be taken with plenty of water. Too much carob will produce the opposite effect and cause constipation.
- **Chocolate** – Contains stimulants that can lead to heart failure or neurological poisoning in high quantities. A very small bit of dark chocolate is okay and can actually temporarily alleviate respiratory distress.
- **Dried Corn** – Can have high levels of fungal contaminants which can lead to liver cancer. Make sure to inspect commercial seed mixes with dried corn. Fresh raw corn and cooked corn are safe for rats.
- **Iceberg Lettuce** – Full of water (which can be good), but has no nutritional value
- **Peanut Butter** – This can cause choking in rats. If you want to give your rats peanut butter, mix it with jam or something liquid to make it less sticky, or spread it in some bread.
- **Plums** – Good source of potassium, vitamin A and fiber. *The pit of the plum contains cyanide compounds.* The cyanogens don't leak into the flesh of the fruit.

Don't forget a water bottle! Be sure your rat *always* has access to water. Check the bottle often to ensure it's not leaking or has gone empty. Keeping water in a bowl is not recommended as they will dirty the water too quickly.

Health

Unfortunately, rats are prone to several illnesses such as respiratory infections and tumors. If you notice some of the following symptoms, it is time to take your rat to the vet:

- Tilting of the head (possible ear infection)
- Excessive and prolonged sneezing
- Sniffing or snorting
- Labored breathing, rattling sound in lungs
- Hunching or loss of limb mobility
- Sluggishness or other uncharacteristic behaviors
- Reddish brown discharge around the nose and eyes (porphyrin)
- Loss of appetite
- Scabs or bald patches appear
- Noticeable pests (lice, mites) appear in the fur – do not worry, they are species specific and will not spread to you



*It's not blood, it's porphyrin.
Photo credit:*

<http://www.afirma.org>

Other things to look for are changes in your rat's coat quality. If they start to look shabby, there might be an issue; especially if you know they are receiving a well-balanced diet. You will also want to check for lumps, as rats sometimes get tumors and abscesses.

Always remember: **GO TO THE VET AS SOON AS POSSIBLE**. By the time you notice your rat is ill, they can go downhill very quickly. This is why it is so important to get to know your rats. Because they are prey animals, a rat's instinct is to hide its illness to avoid drawing the attention of predators. The better you know them, the quicker you can detect that they don't feel well.

It's also important to pick out a vet BEFORE you have an emergency. My personal vet is the Kitty Clinic in Lacey, WA. (<http://kittyclinic.com/>) It would be worth scheduling a routine checkup just so you can get a feel for the vet's knowledge of rats. You don't want to find out your exotics vet is actually rather clueless about rats when your pet is in a life threatening situation! Always be prepared.

Toys and Accessories

One of the best parts of owning rats is getting creative with their toys! They love to chew and they need to be kept busy, so providing your rats with a variety of toys and accessories for their cage is a great idea. Here is a small list of toy ideas for your rats. Check the links at the end of the document with more ideas for you to consider!

- **Cardboard boxes** – They make great hiding places, plus they are fun to chew!
- **Toilet paper tubes** – We all have these!
- **Crumpled paper** - Newspaper, packing paper, tissue paper, crinkle paper, etc. Provides hours of fun and excellent hammock padding!
- **Hanging baskets** – These can be found at your local dollar store!
- **Hammocks** - Either pre-made, or make your own! (See links)
- **Running wheel** – Recommended brands are Silent Spinners and Wodent Wheels. Be sure to buy a large one!
- **Wooden parrot toys** – Buy them at the pet store, online, or make your own! (See links)
- **Parrot perches** – The bendable rope perches are the best!
- **Wooden chew toys** – These can be found in the small animal section of most pet stores
- **Empty (or full) tissue boxes** – Always remove the plastic from the box first. If you give them a full box, make sure the paper is not scented or has added lotion.
- **Hooves** – You can get these at local feed shops. Rats love to chew on them, and it's good for their teeth.



Pictured: 12" Silent Spinner wheel



Pictured: Booda Comfy Perches

Be creative! It's not hard to fill your rat cage with lots of fun, interactive toys. Try asking other rat owners for their opinions and ideas. Some people will amaze you with their creations.

Helpful Links

The following is a list of links that I hope you will find useful. Please let me know if you have any suggestions! I would also appreciate being notified of any links that are no longer available. E-mail me at info@littlewhiskersrattery.com

Cages:

- **Midwest Critter Nation Cages**
Well known for making quality cages.
<http://www.critternation.net/>
- **Martin's Cages**
<http://www.martinscages.com/>
- **Doctors Foster and Smith**
Carries Critter Nation cages and other supplies
<http://www.drsfostersmith.com/>
- **Ratty Corner Cage Calculator**
Use this to determine how many rats will fit in a cage.
<http://www.rattycorner.com/odds/calc.shtml>

Food (Local and Online):

- **Drs. Foster and Smith**
Good prices for Oxbow Rat Food. Available in two sizes, 3lb and 20lb
<http://www.drsfostersmith.com/>
- **Chewy**
Another good resource for buying Oxbow Rat Food. Available in 3lb and 20lb bags.
<https://www.chewy.com/>
- **Kiperts Korner Feed**
Good place to buy Mazuri Rodent Food #1477. One 50lb bag costs \$25.99.
8439 Old Highway 99 SE, Olympia, Washington 98501
(360) 352-3309
(360) 352-1739 fax
kipertsgirls@aol.com
<http://kipertsfeed.com/>
- **Black Lake Nursery & Feed**
This store offers Mazuri Rodent Food #1477 in a 50lb bag for \$39.99 and Oxbow Rat Food in a 20lb bag for \$43.99.
3614 Black Lake Blvd SW, Tumwater, WA 98512
(360) 878-8354
blacklakenurseryfeed@gmail.com
<http://www.blacklakenurseryandfeed.com/>

Rat Toys/Cage Accessories:

- **Ratropolis**
Free hammock sewing patterns
<http://www.ratropolis.com/Rat%20Tutorials/RatTutorials.htm>
- **The Dapper Rat**
Big list of toy ideas
<http://www.dapper.com.au/toys.htm>
- **Wodent Wheel**
A great running wheel for rats
<http://www.transoniq.com/>
- **Hammy Happenings**
DIY guide to making bin cages. I would NEVER recommend these as primary cages, but they make fantastic short-term travel cages!
<http://hammyhappenings.wordpress.com/diy-hamster-cage-bin-cage/>

More About Rats and Rat Health:

- **Rat Guide**
<http://ratguide.com/>
- **RatsPacNW Rat Fanciers Club**
<http://www.ratspacnw.org/>
- **American Fancy Rat and Mouse Association (AFRMA)**
<http://www.afrma.org/>
- **The Rat Fan Club**
<http://www.ratfanclub.org/>
- **Rat Behavior and Biology**
<http://www.ratbehavior.org/rats.html>
- **Rat Forum**
<http://www.ratforum.com/>

Thank you for reading! If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me at info@littlewhiskersrattery.com