

Rat (Fancy Rat)

Care Guide for New Owners

Fancy Rat

Exotic Pet

Highly Intelligent

Social Animal

Quick Facts at a Glance

Species	Rattus norvegicus domestica
Lifespan	2 to 3 years; some reach 4 with excellent care
Adult Size	9 to 11 inches body length; males larger than females
Activity Cycle	Crepuscular to nocturnal; most active around dawn and dusk
Temperament	Highly intelligent, curious, affectionate, and people-oriented
Housing	Minimum 2x2x2 ft for a pair; tall wire cage preferred
Diet	Omnivore; varied diet of lab blocks, fresh foods, and occasional protein
Social Needs	Must be kept in same-sex pairs or groups; rats do not thrive alone
Lifespan	2 to 3 years; a short but deeply rewarding relationship
Good with Kids?	Excellent; one of the best small pets for children when handled gently
Grooming	Self-grooming; very clean animals that rarely need baths

Meet the Fancy Rat

Rats are, without a doubt, one of the most underrated pets in the world. People who have never owned a rat often do not realize what they are missing. Fancy rats, the domesticated descendants of the brown rat, are extraordinarily intelligent, deeply social, and genuinely affectionate animals who recognize their owners, learn their names, enjoy being held, and form bonds that are real and meaningful.

They are also one of the most accessible pets for new owners. They are easy to handle, rarely bite when socialized correctly, adapt well to human schedules, and do not require the same complexity of care as some other exotic animals. The main limitation is their short lifespan. Rats typically live 2 to 3 years, and that brevity is something every owner should prepare for emotionally before bringing one home.

Always Adopt in Pairs or Groups

Rats are highly social animals who live in groups in the wild. A single rat without companions develops depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline. Always adopt at least two same-sex rats together. Two rats are only marginally more work than one, and the quality of life difference for them is enormous.

Where They Come From

Fancy rats are domesticated forms of the brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), one of the most successful and widespread mammals on earth. Brown rats originated in Asia and spread across the globe alongside human civilization. They are extraordinarily adaptable omnivores who thrive in almost any environment.

Rats were first domesticated in the 19th century, initially for rat-baiting blood sports and later for scientific research. The first recorded fancy rat show was held in England in 1901. Over more than a century of selective breeding, fancy rats have been developed in dozens of color varieties and coat types, including standard, rex (curly coat), hairless, dumbo (low-set ears), and many others. Despite their reputation, domesticated fancy rats share very little behavior with their wild counterparts and are gentle, clean, and highly socialized to humans.

Housing and Habitat

Rats are active, curious climbers who love vertical space. A good rat cage is tall, has multiple levels, and gives the rats plenty of room to run, climb, explore, and sleep in cozy hammocks and hideouts.

Cage Size

The minimum recommended cage size for a pair of rats is 2 feet wide by 2 feet deep by 2 feet tall, but taller and larger is always better. Rats thrive in cages with multiple levels connected by ramps and ladders. The Critter Nation Double Unit is one of the most highly recommended rat cages in the community for its generous size, solid shelf options, and ease of access for cleaning and interaction.

Bar spacing should be no more than half an inch for females and young rats, who can squeeze through surprisingly small gaps. Males are generally larger and less prone to escape, but half-inch spacing is still the safest standard. All ramps and platforms should have solid surfaces or be covered with fleece to protect feet.

Bedding

Rats have sensitive respiratory systems and are prone to respiratory disease when exposed to dusty or aromatic bedding. Bedding choice is directly tied to respiratory health. Unscented paper-based bedding such as Carefresh or similar products, kiln-dried aspen shavings, and hemp bedding are all appropriate choices. Fleece liners used on solid shelves and hammocks are excellent and easy to wash.

Bedding to Avoid

Cedar shavings: Aromatic oils are toxic to rats and directly cause respiratory damage and liver disease.

Raw pine shavings: Similar concerns to cedar. Kiln-dried pine is safer but still not ideal.

Scented beddings: Fragrances are highly irritating to rat respiratory tracts.

Dusty substrates of any kind: Respiratory disease is the leading cause of illness in pet rats.

Temperature

Rats are comfortable between 65 and 75 degrees F. They are sensitive to both heat and cold. Temperatures above 85 degrees F are dangerous and can cause heatstroke. Keep them away from direct sunlight and heating or cooling vents.

Enrichment in the Cage

A rat cage without enrichment is a miserable rat cage. Hammocks are beloved by almost every rat and should be in abundance throughout the cage. Ropes, ladders, wooden platforms, and hanging toys give rats things to climb and investigate. Nesting material like torn tissue paper or shredded

unscented paper towel lets them build cozy nests. Rotate toys and rearrange the cage layout regularly to keep things novel and stimulating.

Diet and Nutrition

Rats are omnivores with flexible nutritional needs, but that flexibility can be a trap. A poor diet leads to obesity, organ disease, and a shortened lifespan. A well-planned diet keeps rats healthy, active, and at a good weight throughout their lives.

Lab Blocks: The Foundation

High-quality rat lab blocks should make up the majority of the diet, around 60 to 70 percent. Lab blocks are formulated to provide complete and balanced nutrition in a single food item, which prevents selective eating. Oxbow Essentials Adult Rat Food and Harlan Teklad 2014 are among the most respected options. Choose plain blocks with no added seeds, colored pieces, or mixed grain additions.

Avoid seed and nut-heavy mixes sold as rat food in pet stores. Rats selectively eat the high-fat, high-sugar pieces and leave the nutritious ones, leading to nutritional deficiency and obesity. Lab blocks eliminate this problem.

Fresh Foods

Fresh foods should make up about 20 to 30 percent of the diet and provide variety, enrichment, and additional nutrients. Offer a variety of vegetables and some fruit, along with occasional protein sources. Introduce new foods one at a time to watch for digestive sensitivity.

Safe Foods

- Leafy greens: romaine, kale, spinach (small amounts)
- Broccoli, peas, carrots, cucumber, bell pepper
- Cooked pasta, rice, or oats (small amounts)
- Cooked chicken or turkey (plain)
- Hard-boiled or scrambled egg
- Small amounts of fruit: blueberry, banana, strawberry
- Plain low-fat yogurt (small amount)

Never Feed These

- Raw dry beans or peanuts (toxic uncooked)
- Chocolate or anything with caffeine (toxic)
- Onions, garlic, leeks (toxic)
- Citrus fruit for male rats (linked to kidney disease)
- Green bananas or green potato skins
- Sugary or salty processed human food
- Alcohol of any kind

Treats

Treats should be given in small amounts. Rats love to receive food from your hand, which also makes treat time a great bonding opportunity. Small pieces of cooked chicken, a blueberry, a small piece of banana, or a plain rice cake are all popular options. Commercial rat treats with sugar are best avoided.

Handling and Interaction

Rats are naturally curious and, when socialized well from a young age, actively seek out human interaction. They enjoy being held, carried in pockets or inside a shirt, and sitting on a shoulder while you go about your day. They are gentle animals who rarely bite when treated with patience and respect.

Socializing New Rats

New rats from a rescue or pet background may be nervous at first. Start by offering your hand in the cage and letting them approach you. Progress to gently scooping them up with both hands, supporting the full body. Keep early handling sessions short and positive, ideally with a treat involved. Consistency is key. Handle your rats every day and they will become confident and comfortable with you quickly.

Out-of-Cage Time

Rats should have at least an hour of out-of-cage time each day, ideally more. A rat-proofed area, a bed or couch they can explore while you relax, or a dedicated play space all work well. Rats that get regular out-of-cage time with their owners are significantly more socialized, happier, and easier to handle.

Bruxing and Boggling

When a rat is deeply content, they brux, which means grinding their teeth together in a soft, rapid way. A very happy rat may also boggle, where the vibration of bruxing causes the eyes to vibrate rapidly in and out of the socket. It looks alarming but it is one of the highest signs of rat contentment. If your rat bruxes and boggles while you hold them, they are very happy with you.

Common Health Issues

Rats have a short lifespan and are prone to several health conditions, particularly as they age past 18 months. Finding a rat-experienced exotic vet early is essential. Health problems in rats can progress very quickly.

Respiratory Infections (Mycoplasmosis)

The most common health issue in pet rats. *Mycoplasma pulmonis* is a bacteria that almost all rats carry and which causes chronic respiratory disease. Signs include clicking or rattling sounds when breathing, sneezing, labored breathing, and porphyrin staining (red discharge) around the nose and eyes. It cannot be cured but can be managed with antibiotics during flare-ups. Minimize dust, use appropriate bedding, and keep the cage clean to reduce frequency of flare-ups.

Tumors

Rats, especially females, are highly prone to mammary tumors. These are often benign but grow quickly and should be removed surgically while small. Check your rats regularly for any lumps, particularly along the belly and flanks. Males are more prone to pituitary tumors, which cause progressive neurological symptoms including hind leg degeneration. Spaying female rats significantly reduces mammary tumor risk and is recommended by many exotic vets.

Hind Leg Degeneration (HLD)

A progressive neurological condition common in older rats, particularly males. The hind legs gradually weaken and the rat loses the ability to control them. The front legs and upper body remain functional for a long time. Rats with HLD can still have a good quality of life with appropriate housing modifications: low cage levels, soft bedding, and easy access to food and water.

Porphyrin Staining

A red or orange crusty discharge around the eyes and nose. Porphyrin is a natural secretion from the Harderian gland behind the eye. A small amount is normal. Excessive porphyrin staining is a sign of stress, illness, or respiratory disease and warrants a vet visit.

Obesity

Common in rats fed seed-heavy diets or given too many high-fat treats. Obesity shortens lifespan and contributes to heart disease and organ failure. Feed primarily lab blocks, keep treats minimal, and ensure daily exercise through out-of-cage time.

Abscesses

Localized bacterial infections that form as lumps under the skin, often from small wounds or bite injuries from cage mates. Require veterinary drainage and often a course of antibiotics.

Kidney Disease

Common in older rats, particularly males. Signs include increased water intake, weight loss, and reduced appetite. Supportive care and a low-protein diet can help manage the condition.

Things Every New Rat Owner Should Know

Their lifespan is short, and that is the hardest part.

Rats live 2 to 3 years. This is a genuine grief experience for most rat owners, and it happens relatively soon. Go in with your eyes open and give them the best possible life in the time you have together.

Two rats are better than one, every time.

A single rat without companions is a rat that is suffering. Same-sex pairs or groups are the standard. Two rats are barely more work than one.

Respiratory health is your biggest ongoing concern.

Use appropriate bedding, keep the cage clean, and never use cedar or pine. At the first sign of clicking, wheezing, or labored breathing, see a vet. Respiratory disease progresses fast in rats.

They are smarter than you might expect.

Rats can learn their names, come when called, learn tricks like spinning, standing on cue, and retrieving small objects, and navigate mazes. Mental stimulation is genuinely important for them. Train them, puzzle-feed them, and keep their environment interesting.

Handle them every single day.

Rats that are handled daily from a young age are dramatically more social and confident than rats that are handled rarely. Even 15 to 20 minutes of interaction per day makes a significant difference.

Find a rat-savvy vet before you need one.

Most general practice vets have limited rat experience. Identify an exotic vet in your area who sees rats before you bring your rats home. Rat health can decline very quickly.

Clean the cage at least weekly.

Rats produce significant amounts of urine and ammonia builds up quickly. A clean cage is one of the best things you can do for respiratory health. Spot-clean daily and do a full clean at least once a week.

Check for lumps regularly.

Run your hands gently along your rats once or twice a week. Finding a mammary tumor early makes surgical removal much simpler and gives a much better outcome.

Questions? We're Here!

Boggy's Buddies is always happy to answer questions and support you throughout your rat ownership journey. Reach us at boggysbuddies@gmail.com or find us on Facebook and Instagram.