

## Feeding Your Pet Rat

Rats require a diet that is properly balanced in vitamins and minerals. At HSCC, rats are fed  $\frac{1}{8}$  cup of rat food twice daily (if there is food leftover from the last meal, just top it off and mix the new food in with the old), and a small amount of snacks.

**Rat Food:** There are many commercial rat foods available that are properly balanced to meet your rat's dietary needs. HSCC recommends a high-quality rat kibble like [Oxbow Adult Rat Food](#). (Avoid pre-mixed food, as sometimes rats will pick and choose the tasty junk-food nibbles they like over the other "healthier" bits.)

**Protip #1:** *Always introduce new foods slowly and in small amounts to avoid GI upset.*

**Snacks:** Rats are naturally omnivorous animals, which means that they eat a wide variety of foods including fresh fruits and vegetables, seeds, nuts, grains, the occasional invertebrate (i.e. mealworms), and animal proteins.

Rats often enjoy human foods, but these should be given in moderation as small snacks. Feeding too many high sugar or high fat foods can lead to issues like obesity and other GI troubles. Some good healthy options of snacks may include:

Fruit	Veggies	Herbs	Nuts & Seeds	Other
Bananas Grapes Melon Berries Peaches Apples (no seeds)	Broccoli Carrots Peas Fresh corn Cucumber Baby kale Sweet peppers Cooked sweet potato	Basil Sage Parsley Coriander Fennel Mint	Almonds Pistachios Pecans Walnuts Sunflower seeds	Hard-boiled eggs Mealworms, Superworms Bread, Bland crackers Cooked pasta Unsweetened cereals ( <i>Cheerios, Shredded Wheat</i> ) Baby food ( <i>meat-based</i> )

**Protip #2:** *When hand-feeding your rat snacks, watch your fingers! A rat may accidentally mistake your fingers for treats and give them a nibble.*

### **AVOID GIVING YOUR RAT THE FOLLOWING:**

Raw peanuts  
Avocado skin/pit  
Chocolate  
Citrus fruits  
Mango  
Green potato

Fluorinated and/or  
Chlorinated Water  
Green bananas  
Uncooked/dried beans  
Blue cheese  
Caffeine  
Dried corn

Licorice  
Raw sweet potato  
Poppy seeds  
Raw cabbage  
Raw brussel sprouts  
Rhubarb

## Rat Housing & Enrichment

Rats are smart, active, and sensitive creatures with specific housing and enrichment needs to help them thrive! See below for recommendations on the best rat cages, bedding, accessories, toys, and more!

### Cages

Wire cages with *solid bottoms* are best for rats - they provide proper ventilation and minimize potential foot/leg injuries (which are a risk with wire/mesh floors).

Large, multi-level enclosures are ideal as rats are *VERY* athletic and smart animals and they need quite a bit of space to run around and explore to stay in shape. A good rule of thumb is to plan for a minimum of 2 cubic feet of cage space *per rat*. The bars on the cage should be no more than 0.5" apart, otherwise your rat may be able to squeeze through. Great cage brands include [Critter Nation](#) (see left) and [Ferret Nation](#).



HSCC does ***not*** recommend plastic enclosures (rats can chew through plastic) or glass tanks (these do not provide sufficient space/ventilation for a rat).

### Bedding

Choosing the right bedding is crucial, there are many options available. HSCC uses **fleece blankets** and towels, as they are gentle on rat feet, absorbent, and easy to clean and reuse. You can also easily cut or fold them to the sizes needed for your enclosure. Care Fresh recycled paper and aspen shavings work well as disposable options.

**Protip:** Avoid pine or cedar shavings - the aromatic oils in these bedding options can be irritating to a rat's small lungs and can lead to health problems/allergies.



## Enrichment

In order to keep your rat active and engaged, be sure to include the following items in your rat's enclosure.

→ **Exercise wheel with a solid bottom.** Steer clear of wire wheels and make sure that it is big enough for the size of the rat (there should be *NO BEND* in their back when using it). The bigger the better!



→ **Ladders, rope toys, and hammocks.** Rats love to climb, so providing lots of vertical space and climbing structures will enrich their lives. Ladders, hanging hammocks/beds, rope toys (see right), and wooden bird toys are good options. It is important to make sure that whatever you put into their space can withstand the mighty rat teeth!

→ **Things to chew on.** Rats also love to chew (and need to in order to keep their teeth healthy). You can provide things like cardboard and toilet paper rolls, as well as small animal specific chew sticks, wooden/wicker toys, and plain untreated wood (see [Rat Grooming & Health](#) for more).

→ **A place to nest (and things to nest with!).**

Nesting is another common instinct with rats. They love small spaces and hidey holes where they can curl up and feel safe. Little igloos, cardboard boxes, wooden/wicker huts, and small animal hideouts are all great options. Rats also love to shred fabric and paper towels and build with it to make themselves cozy.

→ **Toys!** Rats also love toys! Small plastic cat balls can work well along with rat-specific toys. Tunnels are also a fun enrichment option for rats. Another way to keep them entertained is to turn anything into a toy by hiding treats in it!

Try putting some treats in a toilet paper roll with the ends pinched, or in a box filled with paper shreds that they have to dig through to find.



## Cleaning Your Rat Enclosure

A clean rat is a happy rat! Rats can clean themselves, but they need your help keeping their enclosure tidy. To keep rats healthy and happy (and to keep your home smelling nice), your rat enclosure should be cleaned frequently. **HSCC recommends doing a spot clean daily and a full clean at least twice a week.** Below are a few tips for your cleaning routine.

### Daily Spot Clean

- Shake out bedding and clean up any droppings and stale/uneaten food (it's okay to leave rat pellets, as long as they aren't too old)
- Remove any soiled bedding and replace with clean bedding
- Be sure to refill the water bottle every day

### Bi-Weekly Full Clean

- Take out enrichment items and replace all bedding
- Wipe/ scrub down surfaces with warm, soapy water
- Clean out water bottle and food dishes



**Make the most of your cleaning time!** It is fun for them if you rearrange their enclosure and the items in their space so that they can re-explore and rediscover everything they own! Remove some that they've had for a while and replace with something new they haven't investigated yet.

**Protip:** Never use chemicals while your rat is in their space - this can be toxic/poisonous. Instead, remove them from the enclosure and let them roam around or use a carrier for their safety.



## Rat Grooming & Health

Rats are very tidy animals - if they are healthy, active, and have access to necessary enrichment items, there is generally no need to bathe them, or even to trim their teeth or nails. However, it is always a good idea to keep a close eye on your rat's appearance, hygiene, and behavior to make sure they are healthy and thriving.

### Teeth

Rat teeth grow continuously, but healthy and active rats keep their teeth in check by chewing and gnawing. Rats LOVE TO CHEW and should always have access to appropriate rat-safe chewable items, which can include:

- Cardboard
- Small animal chew sticks
- Timothy hay cubes
- Untreated softwood\*



*\*Before you give them any softwood branches to chew, bake the wood on a low heat for an hour and give them a good wash to make sure they're safe for your rat. Safe woods to use are: Apple, Dogwood, Elm & Red Elm, Grape & Grapevine, Hawthorn, Pear, Poplar, Quince, Willow (goat, weeping, or pussy willow), Yucca, and Hazelnut.*

### Nails

Rats will naturally take care of their own nails - they can chew them down, and the nails will naturally wear down from running around. However, if your rat's nails appear overgrown (or if they're just too sharp for you), you can trim them yourself using human nail clippers or cat nail scissors. As with trimming all animal nails, you always want to be sure to avoid trimming too much nail so you don't cut the quick. For a detailed, step-by-step guide to trimming rat nails, check out [this Pet Helpful article](#), as well as [this helpful video](#).

### When to See a Vet

It is generally recommended that pet rats go to the vet annually for check-ups. However, if you suspect your rat is sick, seek help immediately! **Common signs that something isn't right include: sneezing, lethargy, weight loss, hair loss, dull eyes, open wounds, diarrhea, and difficulty breathing.** It is also good to be aware that rats are susceptible to external parasites such as lice. If you think your pets are infested, consult a veterinarian as soon as possible.

**Protip:** Rats are considered "exotic" pets, so they require a veterinarian who specializes in exotics.

## Handling Your Pet Rat

Rats are very social creatures who generally love physical contact. When you first bring your new pet rat home, it is important to give them time to adjust to their new home. Moving is very stressful for them, and having a few days to decompress and figure things out will better help them feel comfortable. Give them a little space and time before you start bonding and cuddling with them. **Follow the steps below to start the bonding process!**

1. **Build trust.** When your rat is settled in and it's time to start bonding, expect them to be a bit cautious at first. Help them warm up to you by slowly luring them towards the front of their enclosure with treats, and avoid reaching over/grabbing them without warning.

2. **Lend a hand.** Rats learn a lot about their environments through smell, so one of the best ways to help your rat get to know you is to simply extend your hand near your rat and allow them to sniff you and approach in their own time. Keep in mind that sudden movements may make your rat nervous, so it's best to stay still.



3. **Expect a nibble.** Rats explore the world with their teeth, so a few little bites or nibbles can be expected while your rat is getting to know you. To discourage future bites, make a loud “eep!” noise when they get too mouthy (this is how rats tell each other to cut it out!). If your rat continues their bitey behavior, they may be undersocialized - in this case, they may take a *long* time to trust a new person, so having patience and understanding is important. If you think you have an undersocialized rat, check out some tips here on [how to tame a rat](#).
4. **Time for pets.** Once your rat is comfortable with your hands, try giving them some gentle pets around the head and ears. Rats enjoy physical contact once they're comfortable with you, and gentle petting makes them more trusting of your hands and reinforces bonding time!

*This handout is based on [Pet Helpful](#).*

## How to Pick Up a Rat

Being picked up is something rats must grow accustomed to before they are comfortable or learn to enjoy it. Once they are used to it, rats love to be held and to spend time cuddling with their humans! Follow the steps below to help your rat adjust to being picked up and held.

1. First, and most importantly, ***NEVER EVER pick a rat up by the tail!*** The tail can break off and they can suffer complications from infection or sustain other injuries in a fall.
2. **Start when they're sleepy.** Your rat will be less skittish and squirmy if you start acclimating them to pick-up when they're tired or sleeping.
3. **Use two hands.** Start by using one hand to slowly and gently scoop the rat under the belly, and use the other hand to cup them above for added security.
4. **Practice makes perfect.** Getting your rat comfortable with being picked up can take time, but don't give up! Expect to practice picking them up and holding them securely (but not too tight) many times before they're comfortable with it. With time, they will learn that being picked up is safe, and they won't be so squirmy.
5. **Let them go!** Once your rat is comfortable being picked up and held, let them rest or explore on your shoulders and hands. Rats love perching on people's shoulders while they hang out or walk around the house. Rats also love to cuddle up in sweatshirt hoods and cowl neck scarves!

Whenever you are interacting with your pet rat, **it is important to read their body language!** If they are tense and staring hard at you, this is a clear indication that they do not want to be touched and may be likely to bite. Refer to the overview of rat body language on the following page, and for more details, see this [guide to reading your rat's body language](#).



## A Brief Guide to Rat Body Language

