

# Rats (Fancy, Dumbo, Hairless)

*Rattus norvegicus*



**LIFE SPAN:** 2-5 years  
**AVERAGE SIZE:** avg. 5-9 inches

**PET SUPPLIES PLUS**

EST. 1988, NO FRANCHISE

written by an expert in the pet care industry and approved by a qualified exotic veterinarian

the information on this care sheet is a basic overview and not a substitute for veterinary care. For more information and to find a qualified exotic mammal veterinarian, go to [www.AEMV.org](http://www.AEMV.org)

**WILD HISTORY:** Fancy rats are domesticated brown rats which have been carefully bred for desirable characteristics. They have been kept as pets since the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe. Domesticated rats are physiologically and psychologically different from their wild relatives. Rats have been used extensively as models for scientific research.

**PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS:** Rats have very poor distance vision and depth perception, but they can see colors in the ultraviolet spectrum that are invisible to the human eye. A rat will reach puberty by the time it is only two months old, or younger. Females will go into heat about once a week. This heat period generally lasts one day. A female rat can have a litter of up to 11 babies every 4-5 weeks. Recent research suggests that rats can smell in "stereo" with each nostril working independently of the other, much the same way human ears do. This excellent sense of smell helps the rat locate food.

**NORMAL BEHAVIOR & INTERACTION:** Rats are very social and engaging and are generally very gregarious. Rats are happiest living in groups of two or more. It is sometimes difficult to introduce new rats to each other, so it is best to purchase them at the same time from the same cage at the pet store. Rats are extremely intelligent and enjoy being handled and exploring. They are also well-balanced acrobats! Be sure to provide many toys and playthings. Your rat will love its out of cage time to play with you. Male rats do not often get along well together unless they are siblings and purchased at the same time; also make sure to select a cage large enough to give them separate living spaces. Female rats will get along extremely well. Do not keep males and females together as they reproduce readily. Rats are easily tamed, even if they are difficult at first. The more you handle and work with your pet, the tamer it will become. Any animal *may* bite in defense if it feels threatened, but domestic rats generally are not known to bite. Remember to work with your pet after dusk, as it will be more willing to cooperate since it is a nocturnal animal. Place your pet's cage in a place in the home where it will be around the family, yet protected from direct light, drafts and excess noise during the day. Also be

sure it is high enough to be out of reach of dog noses and small children's hands. Rats are prey animals and can feel threatened by large bodies above them or in their faces.

**DIET:** Rats are omnivores and will benefit from both plant and animal protein (will eat occasional insects such as crickets or mealworms).

**FEEDING:** Commercially prepared rat diets are available at all pet stores. Plain, "rodent block" pellet diets are best, as they offer a complete balanced diet. Diets that include large portions of seeds, nuts and grains may result in malnutrition and obesity. You can feed these items in moderation or as a treat for your pet and use them for training and taming purposes. Be sure to replenish the food in your rat's cage often. Rats are notorious for food hoarding. They will take food to various places in the cage for storage, bury it and often forget about it. For this reason it is important to spot clean your pet's cage daily to remove fresh foods that may become spoiled. Seeds and pellets can remain in their hiding spots.

**FRESH FOODS:** Healthy, fresh fruits, vegetables can also be fed to your rat. Offer these treats in small amounts, as they may cause diarrhea if fed in too great an amount.

**\*\* Please avoid feeding sugary treats such as yogurt drops or honey sticks to your rat. These treats contain far too much sugar and can adversely affect your pet..**

**SUPPLEMENTS:** If fed a balanced diet, supplements are not necessary for your rat.

**WATER:** Clean, fresh water must always be available and should be changed daily. All water should ideally be free of fluorine, chlorine and heavy metals. We recommend that you use unflavored bottled drinking water or bottled natural spring water. If tap water is used, you should treat it with a water conditioner. If you do not want to chemically de-chlorinate the water, you can leave an open container of tap water out for at least 24 hours with exposure to ultraviolet light. Do not use distilled water, which can cause severe medical problems, since it lacks minerals that are essential to important body functions.

## RECOMMENDED SUPPLIES:

- Cage
- Water bottle
- Food bowl
- Food
- Bedding
- Hide house
- Running Wheel
- Chew toys

**HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT:** Many different types of rodent cages are available at the pet store. Do not buy the smallest cages thinking that because the pet is small, it does not need much room. Rats love to run and explore. A 20-gallon glass tank is an excellent sized cage for one to two rats, a 40-gallon is even better and can house up to four rats. Wire sided rat cages are also an excellent choice, given the cage is large enough. Guinea pig and rabbit cages can be used, just ensure the bar spacing is close enough to keep the rat from escaping through them. Rats can flatten their bodies enough to fit through very small spaces - about the size of a half-dollar. Place into the cage several hide houses, a solid floored plastic wheel and chew toys. Small cardboard boxes will also be appreciated. When designing your cage set-up, be sure to include a mesh wire top for the cage that can be

secured snugly with cage "locks". Rats WILL find a way to escape if it is possible.

**HIDE HOUSE:** The hide house is extremely important to your rat, and will most likely become your pet's main 'bedroom'. Two to three (depending on cage size and number of rats) will be appreciated even more. Rats will not often relieve themselves inside the hide house or 'nest', so it is not necessary to disturb the nest to clean it daily. Cleaning of the hide house can be done during the more intensive bi-weekly cleaning.

**WATER BOTTLE:** A full water bottle must be available at all times, refill it daily. Be sure to clean out the inside of the bottle thoroughly during the more intensive cage cleaning sessions every week. Water bottles will often become slimy inside, which will in turn harbor harmful bacteria. Your pet will most likely chew a bottle inside the cage, so be sure to attach the bottle to the outside of the cage. Check the spout daily for any blockages to make sure your pet always has access to the fresh water. If you cannot place the bottle on the outside of the cage, a metal water bottle guard should be used.

**BEDDING:** We recommend an aspen bedding or soft recycled newspaper bedding. Neither of these choices will cause allergic reactions or respiratory distress *and* it is easy to clean. **DO NOT use cedar chips, as they contain dangerous phenols, which are toxic to your pet.** Place enough bedding in the cage so your pet can happily tunnel underneath it. Spot clean your pet's cage daily by simply removing the soiled portions of bedding.

**TOYS:** Several types of toys must be available to your rat. Chewing toys such as wooden small mammal toys (available at the pet store), hide houses, wheels, cardboard boxes, paper towel tubes and dried untreated fruit tree branches are all excellent toys for your mouse. Rats **MUST** chew constantly in order to wear their teeth down, which grow on a continual basis. Therefore, toys that allow your pet to chew and wear those teeth down are invaluable. Stick to toys bought at the pet store, as these are generally made of pet-safe materials.

**CAGE TEMPS:** normal room temperature; not affected by normal house temperature ranges

#### **HABITAT MAINTENANCE:**

Daily maintenance should consist of spot cleaning by removing soiled substrate, cleaning water bowl thoroughly and wiping glass clean. The entire cage should be cleaned thoroughly at least once every month with:

- A mild dishwashing liquid in warm water
- Vinegar & water (1:8) or bleach and warm water (1:32)
- Cage "furniture" should also be scrubbed clean with the same dilution.
- Rinse off all soap and bleach thoroughly with plain water before re-introducing your pet to its enclosure.
- NEVER MIX VINEGAR AND BLEACH - IT CREATES A TOXIC SOLUTION

**GROOMING & HYGIENE:** It is not necessary to clean or bathe your rat. They are extremely neat animals and will groom themselves! If it seems as if your rat has not been grooming him or herself, he may be ill.

**SIGNS OF A HEALTHY ANIMAL:** Healthy rats have a rounded, full body and smooth, even fur with no bald patches. The nostrils, under-tail area, under-chin area, ears and eyes should be clear and free of discharge - fur should not be damp or stained in any way. Your pet should have bright eyes; teeth should be even and well aligned with no staining

around the chin; breathing should be even and not labored, with no wheezing or gurgling sounds. Healthy rats are very energetic and busy; although there are nocturnal and may be caught napping during the day. We recommend physical exams every year with an exotic pet veterinarian. If your vet sees your pet regularly, many common conditions that afflict your pet can be caught and treated early.

#### **SOME COMMON PROBLEMS THAT REQUIRE VETERINARY EVALUATION INCLUDE:**

<b>HEALTH ISSUE:</b>	<b>PHYSICAL SIGNS:</b>
<b>Tumors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lumps, developing often on side of body or under belly</li></ul>
<b>Mites/Lice or Fleas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Loss of hair</li><li>• Bare spots on skin</li><li>• Small red sores</li><li>• Excessive scratching</li></ul>
<b>Traumatic injury</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Obvious open wounds or weeping spots on body</li></ul>
<b>Overgrown teeth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Drooling</li><li>• Bleeding from mouth</li><li>• Inability to eat properly</li></ul>
<b>Respiratory Infection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increased respiratory effort or rate</li><li>• Red discharge around the eyes</li><li>• Lethargy</li><li>• Loss of appetite</li></ul>

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