

The Truly Affectionate 'Pocket Pets' Few People Own

It's too bad only a small percentage of pet parents adopt these intelligent and charming creatures, as they offer many of the benefits that draw people to dogs and cats. Requiring only a fraction of the space as other pets, they will quickly become part of your family if you let them.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Only a small percentage of pet parents own domestic rats, which is really too bad, since these little “pocket pets” are intelligent, inquisitive, and affectionate
- Capable of cuddling, coming when called, learning tricks and bonding with their humans much like a dog or cat does, rats offer many of the benefits that draw people to other pets, but require only a fraction of the space
- Typical behaviors of pet rats include bruxing and boggling, climbing, investigating, and playing; each behavior has a natural, intended purpose
- Rats are charismatic creatures who will quickly become part of your family if you let them; like all pets, they require daily interactions, a healthy diet, and exercise

Compared to the number of U.S. households with dogs and/or cats (about 50%), only a small percentage of pet owners (4%) have small mammals, most often guinea pigs, rabbits, or hamsters. Of that group, only 6% own a rat or mouse,¹ which is really a shame, since these little animals are intelligent, inquisitive, and affectionate. I had my first pet rat when I was 23 and was amazed at how “dog like” Alexander was, in all respects.

As pets, rats are charming and playful, and can learn to come when you call them. You can teach them to learn tricks, too, and, contrary to popular belief, they are quite clean. Their reputation as pests is unfortunate, because anyone who's gotten to know one of these intelligent rodents will tell you they deserve more respect.

In fact, for some people, a rat can be the perfect pet. Capable of cuddling, coming when called, learning tricks and bonding with you much like a dog or cat does, rats offer many of the benefits that draw people to other pets, but require only a fraction of the space.

That said, rats do require daily interactions, feeding (including preparation of fresh foods) and exercise, but they can be ideal pets for those who cannot commit to the needs of a dog but desire the same level of companionship.

Rats Have Unique, Distinct Personalities

Rats are curious, charismatic creatures who will quickly become part of your family if you let them. But they're not content to sit alone in their cages all day; they require interaction with their owners, and ideally another rat, and thrive with mental stimulation such as learning tricks. You can teach your rat to use a litterbox and come when you call him,

much like a cat. Lots of people have taught their pet rats to do all sorts of **tricks**, as they respond well to clicker **training**.

Check out **[Shadow the rat's YouTube page](#)**, where you can see amazing rat agility courses and learn more about rat care.

Further, rats show empathy and will prioritize freeing a trapped cage mate ahead of eating a chocolate treat.² They also laugh when tickled and develop affection for the human hands that tickle them and make them laugh.³ Each rat is unique, too, with its own personality to share with you. Small Angels Rescue, a Maryland-based small animal rescue, notes:

"Ask any rat owner and they will tell you their rat has a distinct and unique personality just like we do! No two rats behave exactly the same way ... even two siblings that grew up together are totally different. One may be outgoing and mischievous while the other is more shy and subdued. Some rats are very busy and curious while others are more calm and lazy ... just like us!"⁴

Typical Pet Rat Behaviors

The following are several common behaviors of pet rats:⁵

- **Bruxing, chattering, and boggling** — Bruxism (teeth grinding) is another normal, natural behavior of rats, whose teeth grow constantly and must be filed down to prevent problems. Rats accomplish this by gently, repetitively grinding their incisors to wear them down. They also need toys, food, and proper care to maintain their dental health.

Chattering also involves repetitive grinding of the incisors, but it is typically louder than bruxing, with more cracks and pops. Interestingly, rats usually brux when they're feeling happy and content, whereas a chattering rat is often unhappy, annoyed, or about to get into a fight with another rat.

A portion of rats' jaw muscles run behind their eyes, and aggressive bruxing can cause the eyes to rapidly vibrate and appear to bulge in and out of their sockets in another behavior considered normal in rats called boggling.

- **Climbing** — Rats are natural climbers and can scale vertical walls if they have footholds. You can help answer that call by providing your rat with a multi-level habitat equipped with a ladder, hammock, exercise wheel, hiding boxes, and other cage accessories that encourage curiosity and movement.
- **Grooming** — Pet rats are very clean animals who require minimal bathing and brushing because they're meticulous self-groomers. They'll also groom other rats and their pet parents!
- **Investigating** — Rats are highly inquisitive animals who love exploring their habitats and the whole house during supervised playtime. They don't have great vision, so they rely on sniffing and their highly sensitive whiskers to inspect items in their environment.
- **Nesting** — Rats are natural nest-builders. In captivity, they enjoy tearing, gnawing, and bringing desirable items back to their nest, which they see as a safe spot that provides physical comfort and safety for sleeping as well as a place to birth pups.
- **Playing** — Rats are extremely playful and will play alone, with other rats, and with their humans. Nightfall is their preferred time to play, which can interrupt the sleep of nearby humans if the rat habitat is in a bedroom.

During play, rats tend to chirp and make other happy sounds, along with jumping, hopping, “popcorning,” and doing zoomies.

- **Scent marking** — Both male and female rats have glands along their flanks (the sides of their abdomen) that contain natural oils used to scent mark their environment. They deposit the oils by rubbing the sides of their bodies and their faces against the target. Male rats also urine-mark to claim territory and as a signal to female rats passing by. They either rub their backsides over a target, leaving a trail of urine, or lift a hind leg, similar to a dog.

Caring for a Pet Rat

Rats need companionship, so you should plan to adopt a pair or more (either the same sex or rats that have been spayed or neutered). They’re also nocturnal, so they’ll sleep much of the day and demand some of your attention at night. Your rats’ habitat should have plenty of space for roaming and the flooring should be solid, not wire, which is painful for animals to stand on.

An aquarium isn’t suitable for rats, as it doesn’t allow for proper ventilation and is isolating. Your pet’s habitat will need to be cleaned regularly, as rats are fastidious creatures and can become ill from living in a dirty cage. Along with safe bedding (no cedar, which can be poisonous), provide your rats with a cozy space to sleep and hide, along with a hammock or two.

Rats also need access to purified, fresh water via a water bottle at all times and require a fresh, varied, species-appropriate diet that includes vegetables, fruits, whole grains and protein. Small Angels Rescue offers a good list to get started:

“Rats often enjoy, among other things, asparagus, avocado, basil, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, celery, corn ... cucumber, eggs (scrambled or hard boiled), oatmeal (made with milk), okra, parsley, peas, red pepper, spinach, sprouts, squash, sweet potato (cooked) and tomatoes.

Fresh fruit can be used as a treat. Rats often enjoy, among other things, apples, bananas, blueberries, cherries (pitted), cranberries, grapes, kiwi, melon, papaya, peaches, pears, pineapple, plums and strawberries. Please note that male rats should not have citrus (lemon, lime, orange, and grapefruit).

Rats may also enjoy whole oats, spray millet, cooked brown rice, cooked pasta, whole wheat bread, coconut, pumpkin seeds, flax seeds, sesame seeds, tofu (packaged, not bulk) and cooked potatoes.”⁶

Along with time out of the cage to explore every day (in a rat-proofed space) for at least an hour (but preferably more), rats need toys and other interesting things to explore, such as tunnels, paper bags, chew toys, ladders, bird toys and nest boxes. Some rats also enjoy running wheels.

Is a Pet Rat Right for You?

Rats (or any small mammal) may not be the best choice for families with very young children, who may handle the animals too roughly and are at an increased risk from rare zoonotic diseases (the same is true for people with compromised immune systems). However, if you’re looking for an intelligent, cuddly pet that is also quiet and small, a

pair of rats may be perfect for you.

Contact a local small animal rescue in your area if you're considering rats as pets; as with other animals, there are many in need of a home, and the rescue will be able to describe the rats' personalities to help you find the best fit for your family.

Sources and References

¹ [The Washington Post October 5, 2019](#)

² [Science December 9, 2011](#)

³ [Scientific American, July 2012](#)

^{4,6} [Small Angels Rescue, Rats](#)

⁵ [PetMD, October 4, 2022](#)
