



The Midlands Rat Club



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Introduction

Whenever you're planning to buy a pet, it's important to get plenty of information well in advance, even if your pet is only small. Is the animal right for your family? How much work is associated with caring for it, and how much will that cost? Can you cuddle it or only view from a distance?

This information is designed to help give you an idea in to rat keeping and provide you with some ideas to help you. It is also intended as a guideline for promoting responsible buying and keeping of rats



General Information

Are rats for you?

Firstly you need to ask yourself a few questions:

1. Can you afford to provide a good size cage and accessories and vet care if needed?
2. Does anyone in your family suffer from allergies?
3. Do you have time to spend with the rats - rats love to explore outside their cages?
4. Can you "rat-proof" an area for them to play - rats love to chew wires and furniture so will need a secure place to "free-range"?

Rats live for 2 years on average but you can expect anything from 18 months to 3 years.

How many rats?

Rats are very social animals so a minimum of 2 should be kept together. However if these are your first rats, then 3 is recommended as this helps if one passes they still have some company.

Rats living in groups can have fun chasing each other around, grooming each other, sleeping in a heap, playing tug-of-war with food, wrestling, sometimes scrapping, communicating, forming friendships, and generally acting like schoolchildren at playtime. If one rat wants peace and quiet, it can simply go off and sleep alone; if it wants company, friends are always at hand. It has many more options than the single rat, who can only sleep, or sit and wait for human attention. Rats living in groups have more full and varied lives than any single rat.

Bucks or Does?

Bucks (males) are generally larger than females and have a more laid back attitude to life. They would rather fall asleep on your knee or inside your jacket than run around. Does (females) are much more active and love to run around and find trouble.

Does do have a higher risk of developing tumours in later life which can cost a lot in vet fees for treatment. Bucks can be castrated and be mixed in with females but only if they are castrated, otherwise you could find yourself with a lot of mouths to feed in a very short space of time.

Where to buy – Breeders, Pet Shops or Rescues?

Breeders

Health & Temperament will be very important to any good ethical breeder. They should be able to provide you with information on the rat's background and family and you may even be able to meet them. Expect to be asked questions and they will expect a few in return. Some will ask you to fill a form in others will like an informal chat - they all want what is best for the rats. They would like to keep in contact with you for the life of the rat as they will need to monitor the lines to make sure no problems arise. They won't have rats available on demand so do expect to wait for kittens!

Rescues

There are lots of rescues all over the country who take in rats from all sorts of backgrounds. Most are impulse purchased from a pet shop, which the children are now bored of. Rescues will do their best to find good homes for the rats that they take in. They will handle them and try and get them over any hurdles which may prevent them from having a home straight away eg biting, aggression etc. Any litters born will be handled from a very young age so they are very friendly when they are homed.

Pet Shop

Buying your pets from a pet shop is a bit of gamble. You may be lucky and get a lovely little pet or unlucky and get one which is unhealthy and one which bites. Pet shops buy their animals from Rodent farms (animals bred en masse) which are housed in tiny containers and the females have litters back-2-back until they are of no more use to the farm. Very little thought is put in to health & temperament of the parents so it is pot luck as to what you will end up with. As the boys & girls aren't separated early enough you may also get a few extra surprises!



A female rat with a litter at a Rodent Farm



Habitat

When you go shopping for a rat cage most of the cages which are labelled as Rat cages aren't suitable - you will normally find better cages which are for ferrets, rabbits or even birds.

Rats like to live in groups and you should buy the biggest cage you can afford and if you're new to keeping rats then a trio would be ideal to start off with.

Your cage should give each rat around 2 square foot of space. You can use cage calculators like the one on the fancy rats website, but these are only to be used as a guide to help you decide. Remember, you owe it to your pets to give them a comfortable and happy home, not just the minimum they can survive in. Rats kept in a large and enriched environment with both ratty and human interaction will develop more character and make better pets.

A few guide to cage buying:

1. Buy the best cage you can afford to suit the rats and you.
2. Watch out for bar spacing - some rabbit, ferret and bird cages have bar spacing over 1" which is easy for most does and kittens to escape from.
3. Male rats tend to like more floor space where as female rats like to climb.
4. Some rats will chew plastic so those with plastic bases may need replacing.
5. Rats require cages to suit their requirements which vary throughout their lives. Cages suitable for young kittens may not be suitable for adult or elderly rats.

Wire cages are the preferred type of housing for rats as they allow good ventilation. On the next few pages you will find some images of some suitable rat cages but this isn't the full list of what is available.



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Habitat

Suitable cages for 3 to 5 rats

- **Critter 2**, Suitable for 4 rats, Size: 70cms x 44cms x 70cms, Bar Spacing: 2cms square
- **Savic Freddy 2**, Suitable for 4 rats, Size: 80cms x 50cms x 63cms Bar Spacing: 1cms
- **Ferplast Furet Plus**, Suitable for 5 rats, Size: W80cms x D50cms X H70cms, Bar Spacing: 1.5cms

Suitable cages for 6 to 11 rats

- **Liberta Abode**, Suitable for 6 rats, Size: 96cms x 80cms 50cms, Bar spacing: 1.7mm
- **Ferplast Furet XL**, Suitable for 9 rats, Size: W80cms x D75cms X H86.5cms, Bar Spacing: 1.7cms
 - **Critter 3**, Suitable for 6 rats, Size: 70ms x 44cms x 105cms, Bar Spacing: 2cms square
- **Ferplast Jenny** (also NEW Jenny KD), Suitable for 6 rats, Size: 80cms x 50cms x 80cms
 - **Savic Freddy 3**, Suitable for 8 rats, Size: 100cms x 50cms x 80cms
 - **The Happy House**, Suitable for 9 rats, Size: 133cms x 80cms x 50cms
 - **Samo 82**, Suitable for up to 8 rats, Size: 32" x 20" x 46"cms
 - **Samo 102**, Suitable for up to 11 rats, Size: 40" x 21" x 49"
- **Tom Rat Cage**, Suitable for up to 6 rats, Size: W82cm x D51cm x H80cm, Bar Spacing: 1cm
 - **Savic Freddy 2 Max**, Suitable for up to 6 rats, Size: 80cms x 50cms x 80cms

Suitable cages for 12 rats or more

- **Midwest Critter Nation**, Suitable for 12 rats, Size 36" x 25" x 63", Bar Spacing: 1/2"
- **Midwest Ferret Nation**, Suitable for 12 rats, Size 36" x 25" x 68.5"cms, Bar Spacing: 1"
- **Liberta Explorer**, Suitable for 12 rats, Size: 159.5cms x 63.5cms x 93.5cms, Bar Spacing: 15mm
 - **Savic Royal Suite 95**, Suitable for 12 rats, Size: 95cms x 63cms x 159cms
- **Liberta The Tower**, Suitable for 14 rats, Size: 96cms x 80cms 50cms, Bar spacing: 1.7mm
- **Ferplast Furet Tower**, Suitable for up to 18 rats, Size: W80cms x D75cms X H161cms, Bar Spacing: 1.7cms
- **Montanan Chinchilla III small mammal Cage**, Suitable for up to 24 rats, Size: W81cms x D119cms X H205cms, Bar Spacing: 13mm

Suitable cages for elderly/sick rats

- **Critter 1**, Suitable for 2 rats, Size: 69 X 42 X 36cms, Bar Spacing: 2cms square
- **Ferplast Mary**, Suitable for 2 rats, Size: 80cms x 50cms x 37cms, Bar Spacing: 1cms
- **Savic Ruffy**, Suitable for 2 rats, Size: 80cms x 50cms x 38cms, Bar Spacing: 1cms



Substrates & Beddings

There are a number of good substrates on the market at the moment which are suitable for rats. This is just a brief guide to help you to make a decision on which one you feel is right for your rats.

Auboise or Hemp

A natural material, which composts readily without the need for added composting agents. Dust extracted.

It can be quite messy if you cage has shallow trays but holds any smells very well. You can buy this from any horse feed shop or some larger pet stores.

Wood Shavings

Shavings which have Pine or Cedar should be avoided as these contain phenols which aren't good for rats. Sawdust is **not** suitable as a substrate for rats. Some people will tell you that shavings aren't suitable but there isn't any evidence to back this statement at the moment.

You can buy BEDMAX which is large flakes of wood shavings or HUNTERS Shavings which is the smaller softer shavings. Lots of breeders use these without any issues.

Chopped Cardboard e.g Finacard, Ecopet, Green Mile

Finacard/Green Mile is shredded cardboard so is finer and softer than Ecopet. Because of the way that these bales are packed they will last a lot longer than you think are a very good value even with the postage.

Carefresh

Made from 100% virgin wood pulp fibre rather than pine or cedar (both have hydrocarbon (oils) that may be linked to pet health problems), and with no added dyes, Carefresh is eco friendly, hypoallergenic and dust free.

Carefresh can be quite dusty and people have reported mite issues after using it.



Substrates & Beddings

Megazorb

MEGAZORB is a horse bedding made from virgin wood pulp. It is produced by high temperature drying (reaching temperatures of up to 500 °C) which not only removes the moisture from the wood pulp but kills off moulds, spores and bacteria. After dust extracting the product twice it is put into 85 litre weatherproof bags.

As with the Auboise it does make quite a messy and can be a nightmare to keep under control.

Hay or Straw

People who keep their rats in outside sheds or garages tend to use hay or straw for extra warmth. The main disadvantage of hay and straw is if the source is not too good, it can bring mites with it. It does not absorb smells or urine well so should be used in conjunction with one of the above substrates also.

Paper Litter Pellets – eg. Yesterdays News, Back-2-Nature

These products can be expensive for a large cage, however they are very good for using in toilet trays as the area can be cleaned & refilled with ease.

Yesterday's News is a virtually dust-free paper litter, with no small particles to track around the house.

Back-2-Nature is 100% environmentally friendly, being made from recycled paper, virtually dust-free, highly absorbent and has a superior odour-absorbency with no additives or chemicals.

Safebed

Safe Bed pet bedding is made from plant fibres and is a safe, bio-degradeable, natural product to use for your pet's comfort



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Toys

There aren't a lot of toys aimed at rats on the market so you can try to make things for them that could be fun and exciting. The only limit is your imagination!

Remember when shopping for things for your rats, also check out items for Birds/Parrots, Ferrets, Chipmunks, Rabbits and Guinea Pigs as most items are suitable for rats too!





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Nutrition

There are lots of ready made rat foods available on the market but most aren't suitable as a main diet. Most rat foods have a poor quality or unsuitable ingredient which is why most people feed rabbit food. Rat Nuggets should be avoided, as they are very boring and lack nutrition.

Most breeders will recommend a diet called "The Shunamite Diet". This is a mix which you make up at home and it can be varied to give your rats something a bit more interesting.

It consists of:

Base Food 60%

Dog kibble or Uncooked Pasta 10%

Human Breakfast cereal and/or seeds & herbs 30%



XtraVital Rat Food



Pets at Home Rat Muesli



Rupert Rat



Alpha Herbal Deluxe (Rabbit)



Burgess Supa Frutti Rabbit Food



Mr. Johnson's Supreme with Fruit

This is just a small selection of what is available!



The Shunamite Diet by Alison Campbell

Feeding your rats

There are many successful ways of feeding a rat, and all rats are individuals with specific needs depending on their genetic background, age, sex, health, environment and activity levels. There is no “one-size-fits-all” prescription for rat diet and all diets need to be adapted and modified to suit the needs of the individual. What follows are general guidelines based on my own experience and research.

Why not just feed a generic rat food/pellet?

There are a number of generic rat mixes and pellets available in the UK. However, these tend to suffer from one or more common problems which mean that there are generally better ways to feed a rat.

Unsuitable ingredient - many of these mixes contain alfalfa and other hay or straw pellets, which are indigestible to rats and almost always rejected. Other unsuitable ingredients include sugar, very small whole grains (often refused), sunflower seeds (allergenic to some rats) and nuts (high protein/fat and best kept as a treat).

Poor quality ingredients – a particular problem where low quality ‘meat’ is used such as chicken derivatives. Issues relate not only to the suitability of the animal parts as a nutritional source, but also to the ethical considerations for the welfare of the animals that provide the meat. Vegetable derivatives are also sometimes used. These tend to be plant parts that are surplus to requirement in other industries, and will vary within a particular feed according to what is available. It is preferable to use a feed that lists specific vegetables.

Inaccessible vitamins and minerals – Vitamins A, C, D and E and copper are often supplemented in generic mixes but in some cases are added to the pellet in the mix. If the rat then rejects these, the supplements are wasted.

Colourings and flavourings - may be added to make the mix look (to humans) and taste more palatable. Flavourings often add sugar to the mix, while many artificial colorants are linked to behavioural changes and possible tumours.

Nutritional suitability – there are a few generic mixes that don’t even match the basic requirements of a rat, being well above the recommended 4% fat and 12-14% protein levels. Some are also high in fibre, often through including ingredients that rats reject.



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Artificial preservatives – these are common ingredients in any rodent nugget or mix containing animal protein. Where manufacturers don't add these to feeds themselves they do not always appear on the list of ingredients, but may still be included as the preservative for any 'bought-in' animal fat. Preservatives like Ethoxyquin, BHA and BHT are known carcinogens (promote cancer).

Boredom - complete pellet diets are favoured by some, but these are a long way from the rat's natural highly varied diet as an opportunistic omnivore. Rats derive a lot of pleasure from food and a varied diet is interesting and can be used to help stimulate foraging behaviours. It is also more likely that a highly varied diet will provide better nutrition than a complete processed pellet.

However, some rat foods and also some rabbit foods make a suitable base for a mix to which you can add other ingredients.

The Shunamite diet

The Shunamite diet is a living, evolving diet which works according to the following principles:

1. Take a suitable base food.
2. Add carefully chosen human cereal
3. Add seeds, vegetables and herbs for variation and interest
4. Add a source of protein.

Choosing a base mix

All diets tend to have staple foods which form a regular and substantial part of the whole. I call these base foods. Generally (for rats) base foods should be grain based and include a good proportion of minimally processed grains. My preferred choice of base food is a mixture of straight grains which are purchased individually and then combined. I feel this gives maximum flexibility for creating a mix that is ideally adapted to the needs of the rat, and also removes the negative aspects of generic mixes. However, there are many other suitable alternatives and I have included a list of some of these at the end of the article. The base food would make up approximately 50-60% of your mix.

Human cereals

These are extremely useful for adding variety, reducing phosphate levels, reducing anti-nutrients (these occur naturally in unprocessed grains and prevent the nutrients from being fully utilised) and adding vitamins and minerals (most human cereals are fortified). A list of human cereals along with their suitability in terms of feeding rats can be found here. Human cereals would make up approximately 20 - 25% of your mix.



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Seeds, vegetables and herbs

These add interest, good oils, vitamins and minerals to your mix. Hemp seeds are very popular but many other seeds can be used as well, and some seeds

have specific medicinal properties. Pumpkin seeds are preferable to sunflower, which cause allergies and skin reactions in some rats. Dried carrots, peppers, leeks and other vegetables are generally well received. Bunny herbs such as dandelion, plantain, meadow mixes and herb mixes are excellent and I try to put a reasonable volume of these into my mix. Kelp and garlic are also useful additions with medicinal properties. Seeds, vegetables and herbs would make up 10-15% of your mix.

Protein source

This can be anything from soya flakes, chick peas, peas and other legumes, (preferably soaked and roasted as these also contain anti-nutrients when raw, which make the nutrients in them less available), to a quality dog kibble (like Burns) or freeze dried fish and insects. The amount you need to add will depend on the amount of protein in what you are offering. For instance you would need to add more in terms of legumes or dog kibble to deliver the same amount of protein as dried river shrimps. The protein would make up 5-10% of your mix.

Treat ingredients

Nuts, dried fruit and other treats can be added to a mix in very small amounts. Some people prefer to hand feed these individually to rats.

Other base foods

Xtra Vital Super Supreme Rat Food

PAH Rat Muesli

Harrison's Banana Rabbit Brunch

Mr Johnson's Supreme Rabbit Mix

Mr Johnson's Supreme With Fruit Rabbit Mix

Mr Johnson's Clover Country Crunch Rabbit Mix

Supa Natural Deluxe Rabbit Food

Supa Fruiti Rabbit Food

Supa Deluxe Rabbit Food

NB Other generic mixes may be suitable. Inclusion does not constitute a recommendation by the author. If using any generic mix as a base food I would recommend mixing at least two together for greater variety. I have not included Alpha Herbal Rabbit Food because recent changes may make it less appropriate than many of the other foods listed.

If you are using a base food that contains animal protein, the separate protein addition to the mix should be reduced accordingly, but because of the other 'dilutions' extra protein sources can still be added sparingly.

Converting percentages for your mix

The easiest way to do this is to use a cup or a scoop to measure out the mix. Each cup/scoop would equal 10%, so if you want 25% you would add 2 and a half cups of that element of the mix. Precise measurements are not important so long as plenty of variety is included, and once you become familiar with rough proportions you may feel comfortable about just mixing by eye.



**Alpha Herbal
Deluxe**



**Harrison's
Banana Brunch**



**Mr. Johnson's
Supreme with fruit**



Rupert Rat



Nutrition

The advantage to rats is that they will eat nearly everything you give them. There are some things that you need to avoid, such as citrus fruit for boys as this is linked to cancer. The Scuttling Gourmet book which is very good for ideas and will give you some very good and helpful advice on feeding in general.

Some favourites:

Chicken
Fresh Salmon (cooked)
cous cous
tins of beans (mixed, chickpeas, kidney etc)
Pasta (cooked)
tinned tuna (spring water is best)
Brown rice
Sardines
Eggs (Boiled or scrambled)
Curly Kale
Spinach
Cauliflower
Broccoli
Potatoes (Boiled, roasted, mashed or jackets)
Avocado
Banana
Strawberries (especially in the summer)

Young rats (Kittens) need a higher protein diet until they are 12 weeks old



Health

The information on these pages should not be used as professional advice. It is here only as a guide. If you think your rat is sick, then please seek veterinary attention!

Rats can get sick, even very fit and healthy ones and it can all happen rather quickly so a quick response is needed.

The most common issues you will come across in rats are:

1. Upper respiratory disease
2. Lower respiratory disease
3. Pneumonia
4. Abesses
5. Balance/Head Tilt
6. Mycoplasma / Mycoplasmosis
7. Tumours
8. Skin Problems
9. Barbering

While not as common as other issues, these viruses can cause a lot of heartache for owners:

10. SDAV (Rat Coronavirus)
11. Sendai Virus

There are more issues that rats can suffer from but these ones are the most common people will see. These aren't here to scare you or put you off owning rats but for you to be aware of issues that can happen so when they do you have a chance of recognising the symptoms.



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You should give your rats a daily health check and a thorough health check at least once a week and also before taking the rat to a show.

The key things to check 'at a glance' on at least a daily basis with your rat:

Nose - check for redness, listen for noisy breathing.

Eyes - check for staining and redness, eyes should be clear and no sign of cloudiness.

Mouth - check teeth not overgrown, check for any sores around the mouth area that could be caused by overgrown teeth.

Chin and face - free from scabs, protein related scabs tend to accumulate under the chin area and around the face.

Ears - clean and free from scabs, scabs in the ear area may be sarcoptic mites.

Chest - hold rats belly against your ear to listen for unusual noises and wheeziness.

General body - free from scabs and wounds, also check regularly on the underside for mammary lumps. Check around rump area for mite scabs and lice. Skin should 'ping' back when gently pinched.

Feet and Legs - check for bitten toes and lumps on the underside of feet.

Coat - smooth and glossy to touch, apart from rex rats. No bald patches.

Tail - clean and smooth, check for cuts and damage.



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MRC Shows

Rat shows are fun; you get to meet a lot of like minded people who don't mind if you talk about rats all day and you also get to cuddle other people's rats! For anyone thinking about breeding, rat shows are a great place to see all the varieties and ask other breeder's questions.



There are two classes at a rat show - Varieties and Pet. The varieties section is broken down in to the various colours and markings which have a standard set by the NFRS. The pet section can be any colour and markings and is mainly judged on temperament.



You don't have to be a breeder to show your rats. Many of the rats entered are from pet homes that only have 3 or 4 rats. Why not take a look at the MRC Archives and see what has happened at previous shows?

Shows aren't about winning trophies & rosettes – they are a chance for everyone who loves rats to get together and have a chat and some fun!

The MRC doesn't have a kitten sale table but we do allow registered exchanges between breeders/owners.



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Our shows are run by volunteers who work very hard to make sure every show runs smoothly. We are always looking for extra hands so don't be afraid to offer your help.

There are quite a few things you can volunteer for:

- Helping to set up the hall for the show
- selling raffle tickets
- 1 hour in the kitchen – washing up/serving
- Pet & Varieties Stewards/Scribes
- Cuddle corner
- 1 hour on a fun event
- Sweeping up
- Tidying away chairs & tables at the end

Refreshments are available from the kitchen where you can offer to work for 1 hour serving drinks or doing some washing up.

We try to promote rats as pets, and where possible have a cuddle corner as part of the publicity stand where people can come in and meet a rat close up.

At our Shows we hold some fun events to help keep people busy and on the go during the show. We do quiz's, curiosity table, agility, tombola, guess my name, guess how many items are in the jar, colouring competitions for our younger members/guests just to name a few.



Tombola



Guess my Name?



Raffle Table



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Showing

So you fancy entering a rat or small furry but aren't sure what to do?
Hopefully this very simple guide will help explain what you need to do to enter.

Before the Show

About ten days before the show you can start thinking about which rats you might enter. Any nervous or shy rats generally do not enjoy shows, and should not be considered.

Pets or Varieties

For people who are showing for the first time, we would recommend that you enter your rat(s) in to pet. Pets are judged on character, friendliness, health and condition so there colour/markings don't matter nor does where they have come from e.g. breeder, rescue or pet shop. You can always ask if your rat(s) fit any of the varieties standards so you know for future reference.

If you wish to enter your rat in to varieties, then you need to check the NFRS websites for recognised varieties and see if your rats fit in to any of the sections. If you got your rats from a breeder they should be able to tell you if the rats are showable and what standard they fit in to.

MRC also has a section for small furry pets, so those with Rabbits, guinea Pigs, Hamsters or Mice can enter!

Entering

Entries can be taken via the MRC website, email and/or phone, and generally close 3-4 days before the show. The MRC has an excellent online system which gathers all the information required from you to make sure you enter your pet as easily as possible. You will need to let the club know if you require hire tanks to show your rats in. For the first few shows, I would suggest doing this and if you enjoy showing, consider buying some of your own.

Show Preparation

The evening before the show try get all the rats ready. Clean their tails using a little soapy water and either an old toothbrush or a sponge scourer and brush their tails to try and remove most of the dirt. Rather than bathe your rats try using sensitive baby wipes on the fur to remove any stains or marks that might have appeared.

Use this time to check them over for any injuries and scabs and check that they are healthy enough to attend the show. Clip their nails - if this is something that you aren't confident about doing yourself, mention it to the show sec and they should be able to help you find someone who can help you.

On the Day

On the morning of the show check your rats over carefully before you put them in their travelling box, as there is no point in taking a rat to a show that has gained a scratch or a snuffle overnight. Make sure you take a source of moisture for the show - Cucumber, apple or carrot. It is sometimes worth taking nail clippers and some baby wipes with you so you can use them before your rats go in to the tanks.



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You will also need to take with you some bedding for the show tanks - the permitted substrates vary between the clubs, so check what is acceptable well in advance. Most shows run a raffle to help cover the hall hire costs, so do try to remember to take a small prize.

At the Show

Try to be at a show 30 minutes before judging starts to allow yourself time to sort out your rats. Once you arrive, find somewhere where you can put your rats down so you can go and find the show sec. They are normally located by the door of the hall under mountains of paperwork. If you let them know that it is your first time showing, they will explain/show you what to do. The show sec will give your hire tanks (if you have hired some) and some labels for your tanks.

Place around 3" of substrate in the bottom of the tanks along with 1 piece of cucumber (around 1" thick). This is where you can give your rats another wipe over with a baby wipe and double check their nails. Once the rats are in the tanks, make sure you put the right labels on the tanks. The show sec should have given you a piece of paper with the rats that you entered and the tanks numbers so you can find them again easily. Once you are happy that your rats are ready you can then take them to the judging tables. There will one area for pets and one for varieties. If you are unsure, ask the stewards who will be arranging the tanks into order.

Now you are free to shop, volunteer for kitchen duty, sell or buy some raffle tickets, and talk to lots of people about rats.

If you have rats with you that are not entered in the show make sure you are familiar with the rules for shoulder rats at that venue - some shows do not allow shoulder rats in certain areas, and occasionally they are not allowed at all.

After Judging has finished

Once the judging has taken place, you will be told that you take your rats from the tables so the clearing up can begin. Once all the rats & stuff is put away in the car the hall then needs tidying up - tables & chairs need to be put away and the floor swept. The quicker this is done the sooner everyone can start the journey home.

Presentations

At the very end is the presentations. The show sec will announce when this will be as the hall needs to be spotless before they are given out. The judges will then give the rosettes to all the winners of each of the classes plus the Best in Show, Reserve Best in Show and Best Opposite age awards. Anyone who didn't win a rosette will be able to collect their critiques from the show secretary's table at the end of the presentations.

That's it - show over until next time and you get to do it all again!

If showing is something you are interested in, please ask any member of the committee who will be more than happy to explain how it all works to you.



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Varieties

There are lots of varieties of rats; some are more popular than others. This is a simple list of the varieties and the classes they are in.

New Varieties: Apricot Agouti, Bareback, Blue Point Himalayan, Cinnamon Chinchilla, Coffee, Cream, Essex Capped, Havana, Hooded Downunder, Merle, Powder Blue, Quick Silver, Russian Burmese, Russian Dove Agouti, Russian Pearl, Sable Burmese, Satin, Spotted Downunder, Turpin, Wheaten Burmese

Self: Pink Eyed White, Champagne/Buff, British Blue, Black, Mink/ Chocolate, Ivory

Marked: Berkshire/ Badger, Irish, Hooded, Variegated, Capped, Essex (including Blazed Essex), Chinchilla, Squirrel, Roan/ Striped Roan

Russian: Russian Blue, Russian Dove, Russian Blue Agouti

Shaded: Argente Crème, Himalayan, Siamese, Blue Point Siamese, Burmese

Any other Variety (AOV): Topaz, Silver Fawn, Silver, Agouti, Cinnamon, British Blue Agouti, Lilac Agouti, Pearl/ Cinnamon Pearl, Platinum Agouti

Rex: Self Rex, Marked Rex, Russian Rex, Shaded Rex, AOV Rex

Dumbo: Self Dumbo, Marked Dumbo, Russian Dumbo, Shaded Dumbo, AOV Dumbo, Rex Dumbo

Guide Standard: Lilac, Russian Silver, Russian Silver Agouti, Golden Himalayan, Platinum, Russian Topaz



Breeding

If you think breeding is as simple as putting a male & female together then think again. There is a lot to think about! Before breeding ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you have room for a number of cages?
- Can you house the number of rats that you will need to keep the line going?
- Could you keep the whole litter if you couldn't find homes?
- Do you know the history of the rats you have for breeding?
- Do you have enough money to cover vet fees if things should go wrong?
- Can you provide a large amount of time to the kittens and rats?

If you answered no to any of the questions then breeding isn't for you.

One of the most common reasons people decide to breed their rats is because they have a lovely buck or doe and they would like to have some of this particular rat's kittens. However, breeding healthy, well-tempered pets (which should be the first and foremost aims of any breeder) is not as simple as this. You need to ask yourself a number of questions:

Do you have the necessary...?

Time

Breeding your rats can take time. As well as the 'fun' time needed - socialising and playing with the kittens every day as they get older - they'll need cleaned out more frequently and more time will be needed preparing food. You also need to consider the possibility that something may happen to the nursing doe so would you be prepared to hand rear the babies? All this time can mount up so you really need to consider whether you have enough time to spare.

Money

Breeding your rats is not a way to make money, if anything it will cost you money. As well as the obvious costs such as extra food and litter for the kittens there are 'hidden' costs too. For example you may need to buy more cages either to separate the bucks from the does when they reach sexual maturity or because you are unable to find homes for all your kittens and your current cages aren't big enough to fit them all in. You may also need veterinary treatment for mum and/or babies. Depending on your veterinarian even basic treatment for rats can be expensive as they are often classed as 'exotic' pets. You'll probably also find yourself buying new things for the kittens such as toys and hammocks.

A good veterinarian

Do you have a regular veterinarian who, if not rat competent, is willing to learn? If your rat has a medical emergency during the birthing process you will not have time to ring around different vets and compare prices, locations etc. You need to be able to get help ASAP from a veterinarian you trust.



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Space

Do you have the space for extra cages for a nursing mum and then her kittens? This may seem like a silly thing to need to think about but it is not. Your nursing doe will need a warm location where she can care for her young in peace.

Do you have the necessary personal qualities?

Commitment

Would you begrudge giving the extra care and time your mum and her kittens will need? If so you should not breed. You need a passion for your rats and for helping any kittens grow into well tempered, sociable adults. You cannot neglect to handle them for a week as at such a crucial stage of their development this could affect them for life. You should also be aware that not all rats are of breeding quality so it could take a lot of time, money and love for many rats before you find suitable rats to breed from. Although kittens may be sold to you as 'potential breeding quality' they are just that, of *potential* breeding quality. Although based on family history, genetics etc you can predict how a kitten will develop it is not an exact science and you never know how your little kitten will have developed in 6 months time.

Emotional issues

You also need to very carefully think about what you will do with these kittens and in particular whether you will be able to give this kittens away. Although you may plan to keep all the kittens do you have the room for a possible 18 new rats? If not could you give them away, this can be a very difficult thing to do especially if the new owners are not well known to you (as if often the case - you cannot rely on all those friends who say they quite like your rats and would consider having some kittens). Another thing to consider is whether you could cope with the death of your breeding doe and some/all of her kittens. Although problems are rare they can and do happen, so could you cope with such losses.

Do you have the right rats to breed from, and do you know as much as you can about them?

There are a lot of things you need to consider when choosing your potential parents. Finding the right rats to breed from can be very difficult. You should not breed from pet shop bought rats due to the lack of knowledge of their background and you should not breed from a rescue rat for the same reasons (and most rescues come with an agreement that they are not to be bred from).

Do you know the ancestry and genetic background of your rats?

You may ask why this is important? A sound knowledge of your rat's ancestry can help you highlight any possible problems in this line of rats such as tumours and mycoplasmosis. If you do not know your rat's ancestry for example because your rat came from a pet shop then you really should not consider breeding your rat. Your doe may be lovely at 8 months of age but how are you to know she will not die young from mammary tumours, in answer you don't so it is not fair to put any kittens at risk of a similar fate. Although knowing the ancestry and genetic background of rats does not necessarily mean you will always have the healthiest and best tempered rats it does increase the likelihood that these are the kittens you will end up with.

Do you have an understanding of genetics, and if not are you prepared to learn?

An understanding of genetics will enable you to ascertain the type of kittens which are likely to be born. You may wonder why this is important but sadly it is true that many people favour particular colours and types of rats. It is not simply a case of mating your Siamese rat with a black rat and expecting a rainbow litter of babies. Some genes are dominant and some are recessive and knowledge of this can help you calculate likely offspring.



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Do you have a breeding aim?

This question covers much of what has already been discussed but it is important that you consider this carefully. Your first and foremost aim should be to breed happy, healthy pets. Breeding for type and colour need also to be considered but should be secondary to the aims of breeding for health and breeding for temperament. Also remember that as already discussed breeding rats is not a way to make money. Before beginning breeding you need to carefully consider your specific aims and plans. For example what kind of rats do you wish to focus your breeding on? How many litters do you hope to have in a year? Where will the kittens be advertised/rehomed?

Are you prepared to be mentored?

If you are new to breeding it is a good idea to consider being mentored by an established breeder, especially if some of the issues raised here have made you realise that you do not know as much about breeding as you thought you did. The mentoring experience can be invaluable but it can take time. Firstly you will need to locate a breeder who is willing to mentor you, and then you will need to meet with this mentor to discuss the process and physically see things such as a suitable buck for breeding.

What are the alternatives to breeding?

Other Breeders

Perhaps after reading this article you have some doubts about whether breeding is for you, so what are the alternatives you may wonder. Well you could get in contact with already established breeders and home a pair (or more) of 6 week old kittens from them.



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General Rat Facts

Rats live on average for 2 - 3 years

The male rats are known as "bucks" and the female rats are known as "does".
The baby rats are called as "kittens"

Rats can be sexually mature as young as 5 weeks old

An average size litter is 12 but this can vary from as little as 2 up to 22!

A group of rats is called a mischief.

Rat's temperature is regulated though its tail (assuming it has one). A really hot rat will lie on its back so that it can "sweat" through the soles of its feet.

Rats can't vomit. A rat can, however, gag on something if it eats too quickly.

Rats don't have thumbs.

Rats can jump from a flat surface up to 36 inches high.

Rats are very social animals and do best when kept with other rat companions.

Rats, with their long tail, have a very acute sense of balance; therefore, they are excellent climbers.

Rats can swim and many enjoy it.

Rats are extremely clean pets and are among the most intelligent and curious.



A happy rat will chatter or grind its teeth. Often, chattering teeth results in "vibrating" eyes, caused by the lower jawbone pressing the backs of the eyes. This is a good sign, regardless of how silly it looks.

Rats have been proven to make a laughter-like noise (unable to be heard by the human ear alone) when tickled and dream while sleeping.