

## Small Pet Care: Mice & Rats

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Now that you've decided to have pet mice or rats as part of your household, you want to make sure you provide the best care for them. Besides their cute and playful qualities, what attracted you to mice or rats is the fact that they take up less space and require less maintenance. However, low maintenance does not mean no maintenance. The three main aspects that you need to consider to ensure the best health of your pets are nutrition, hygiene, and exercise/play.

### **Nutrition**

Improper diet is the leading cause of some of the most common ailments in mice and rats. A poor diet can result in obesity, diarrhea, or overgrown teeth. Provide a balanced diet that is high in fiber and limit or avoid oil-rich and high-fat foods such as nuts and sunflower seeds. Include coarse vegetable matter or fibrous roughage to encourage the natural wearing of teeth.

Commercially available [foods](#) and pellets should be the mainstay of a nutritious diet for mice and rats. Balanced "block" type diets are ideal since they are nutritionally complete and provide the added benefit of gnawing exercise. Make sure the commercial foods are complete or balanced to ensure proper nutrition.

Vary their diet by supplementing with small amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables, especially items such as carrots, cauliflower, broccoli, and apples. Fruits and vegetables should only make up a small portion of their total diet. While they are nutritious, excess fruits and vegetables can cause diarrhea.



Seed mixes are not the best alternative since mice and rats will often ignore the

pellets in the mixture or eat only certain seeds in the mixture. Your pet will not receive the proper nutrients if they are "picking and choosing" particular items. Limit feeding seeds or mixes that contain seeds if your pets are eating just the seeds.

Rats have a "sweet-tooth" and crave sweets. Resist the temptation of feeding anything sugary or with processed sugar. Consider "healthier" treat options such as small pieces of fruit or commercially available [treat](#) items. These treats should be given occasionally in small quantities based around a nutritionally complete diet.

In addition to a balanced diet, remember to provide a daily source of clean fresh water for your mice.

### Hygiene and Cleaning

Though pet mice and rats have a natural musk to them, their smell should be slight and not unpleasant. The primary cause of strong odors is inadequate or poor cleaning routines. It is important to regularly [clean and sanitize](#) cages, not only to minimize odors but also to keep your pets healthy. Proper maintenance is important, especially if your pets are housed in a glass aquarium where ventilation may not be adequate. Vapors from urine or other waste materials can linger. Wet bedding materials or uneaten fresh foods can encourage the growth of bacteria, mildew, and fungus. These conditions can cause respiratory ailments.

Uneaten fresh foods should be removed and dishes and water bottles should be cleaned daily when new food and fresh water is given. Heavily soiled areas should be removed from the bedding material daily. The entire cage, including accessories, should be thoroughly cleaned and the bedding changed once a week.

Clean the cage and accessories weekly with hot soapy water to remove any hardened material and sanitize using mild bleach or disinfecting solutions to kill germs. Thoroughly rinse the cage and accessories and air dry. Make sure cage and accessories are completely dry before putting everything back.

### Exercise and Play

Because pet mice and rats are very intelligent social animals, they can quickly become bored if enough activity and stimulation are not provided. This can result in undesirable activities such as excess chewing or gnawing, constant moving or rearrangement of accessories, or regular attempts to escape.

Provide [toys](#) and an [exercise wheel](#) for activity and stimulation while you are away. [Chew toys](#) are a good choice since they offer stimulation as well as gnawing exercise that help wear down teeth. When you are home, spend at least half an hour a day playing and interacting with your pet outside of the cage. Never leave pet mice or rats unattended when they are out of their cages.



Pet rats are very intelligent and can learn to respond to their name and come to you when called. Time spent training your pet rat is quality time socializing and interacting with your pet. Call your pet rat by name and reward him with a piece of Cheerio each time he responds correctly to your command. Discover what other "tricks" your pet rat can learn.

Provide a healthier, happier life for your pet and avoid more serious problems with proper nutrition, cleaning, and exercise. Caring for a pet should never be a chore. Observing these three basic aspects will make caring for your pet easier and rewarding for both you and your pet.

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