



Support for adopters

GUIDANCE FOR NEW RAT OWNERS

Taking your new rats home

You've chosen your new rats and are raring to take them home, but before you take one step through the front door there are a few things you need to sort out to make sure your home is ready for your new pets.

Moving on

Set the cage up with the appropriate bedding, nesting materials and cage furniture as advised by the RSPCA and take with you to collect your new pets. When you arrive at the centre/branch you should transfer some used but dry bedding over to the new cage which will help your rats feel at ease and reduce the stress of travelling. Observe your rats before travelling to make sure that they are OK to travel and check that the cage is secure, safe and that no objects are going to move during transportation that could injure your rats.

Smell is really important to rats' communication so they need enough space to escape each other if they want to; remember the familiar bedding, a disruption in the smells of their environment can trigger fighting.

If you can't transport the cage use an appropriate carrier. It should be secure and made of suitable material - cardboard or wooden carriers are not suitable for rodents as they are non-absorbent and rats will simply chew their way out of them! Again, put familiar bedding into the carrier and don't transport any rats together if they aren't familiar with each other. Cover the cage or carrier to keep it dark but ensure that it is still well-ventilated.

Settling in

When you get home it is best to leave them for 24 hours to get used to their new surroundings, though still provide food and water and check they are behaving normally and aren't showing any signs of illness/injury. The cage should be placed in a quiet area, away from running water, electrical equipment like TV and computers (as the frequencies emitted from this equipment can upset rats) and away from other pets. Your new pets are nocturnal so you might not want to put them in a bedroom in case they make noise during the night when they are awake. Direct or bright lights should be avoided near the home-cage; natural daylight (not direct sunlight) should be present where they are housed and the room should be dark at night.

As your rats settle in you can reassure your new pets by being calm and patient. They need access to safe hiding places they can go to if feeling scared. Eventually, your rats will enjoy getting out of their cage to explore and exercise under supervision so there shouldn't be any areas that your pets can escape to. The room should be rat-proofed; make sure electrical cables are covered and that there are no hazardous plants.

Remember that your rats don't know you or your lifestyle, so introduce different activities and people over a period of time, particularly supervising any interactions with children.

Home comforts

Your home will be different to the animal centre/branch your pet was living in, including the cage itself. As well as space to exercise and somewhere to hide, your rats will need somewhere warm, dry and quiet to sleep; providing a few shelters is important so they don't have to rest together if they don't want to. Make sure that there is at least one shelter that is large enough for them all to rest in together too. The entrance should be angled to prevent light getting in when they are resting and should have multiple entrances/exits so no rat gets trapped inside by another rat. Use vertical and horizontal dividers in the cage (shelves and climbing facilities such as ropes) to increase the complexity of the cage and allow your rats to confidently move about.

Safe toys, suitable objects to scent-mark and regular opportunities to play with people and with each other after the first day or so may also help your rats settle in. If the behaviour of your rats changes or they show regular signs of stress or fear, talk to your vet.

Food and water

Changing diet suddenly can cause an upset tummy so feed your new rats with the diet they have been used to. Information about food and advice on feeding will be provided in the adoption pack you will be given when you come to collect your rats. If you want to change your pets' diet to something else of your choice, do so gradually over about ten days, mixing a little of the new food with the old to gradually wean your rats onto the new diet. For variety, small quantities of suitable cleaned root vegetables or pieces of fruit, seeds and grains can supplement their diet but introduce these slowly too. Do not give your pets grapes or rhubarb as these can be poisonous to rodents. Rats should be fed their daily ration in two meals per day (unless advised otherwise by a vet) and they must always have access to a bottle of fresh water.

Out and about?

Eventually you may like to give your rats safe and secure opportunities to exercise and explore outside of their cage. Always supervise any access outside of the cage; using a rodent exercise pen is a great idea to provide a secure area and you can put suitable objects in the pen to encourage your rats to explore. For example, they like to dig, so trays filled with bedding to dig in will be interesting to your pets. Rats are really clever too - training can help to improve the rat/human bond, and will help keep them physically and mentally active.

Exercise balls are not recommended to provide your rats with exercise as they can actually be stressful for your pets. Your rats will also not be able to access food, water, places to hide, etc, while they are in an exercise ball.

Good company

Make sure that you keep a close eye on the behaviour of your rats. Although rats are sociable, fighting can still occur. Check your rats each day to make sure that none of them are injured and needing veterinary attention. Be sure that any aggression between the rats is not becoming a problem, particularly in the initial time when they are settling in to your home. Make sure that they have enough space and resources (e.g. shelters) within their cage to avoid each other if they wish. If you add adult rats at a later date, there may be a period of aggression so do so gradually. However, if they establish a hierarchy within the group, the levels of aggression should drop.

If you have more than one cage, don't house directly next to each other as this can cause stress if they can smell each other. This also applies to housing rats near other species of rodent - they can be active at different times of day and so disturb each other. There is also the risk that rats may transmit diseases to other rodent species too.

Vet for your pet

Making sure you have someone professional to turn to if your rats are ill or involved in an accident is very important. Register your rats at a local veterinary practice before bringing him/her home. You'll need to give the vet your rats' medical record as soon as possible; this will be given to you in your adoption pack when you collect your rats.

Health check

Check your rats' teeth and nails regularly. Rodents have teeth that never stop growing; make sure your rats' teeth aren't getting too long as this will be painful. If you think your rats' teeth are too long, speak to your vet who will be able to trim them and give you advice on preventing it happening again.

Getting help

If things aren't going smoothly and you have concerns about your rats, talk to your vet or contact the RSPCA centre or branch from whom you adopted your rats. There is lots of useful information and helpful tips on the RSPCA website: www.rspca.org.uk/rats.

It takes time, effort and understanding to help your pet get used to its new life, and to help it overcome problems, but all the time and effort will be worth it when the end result is a happy addition to your family!