

Six Reasons to Adopt One of These Often-Shunned Pets

Many people cringe at the thought, but that's only until they get to appreciate their intelligence, affection and charm. They're actually very clean pets, and you may be stunned to learn that you can teach them to come when called by name and to do tricks.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Rats are intelligent, playful and affectionate; they're also fastidiously clean
- Many rats enjoy cuddling with their owners and will come to you when called
- Rats form strong bond with their owners but also do best with the company of at least one other rat buddy

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In considering which type of furry pet to add to a household, many families automatically consider only cats or dogs. However, rodents — specifically rats — make the perfect companions for some people.

Only about 3% of pet-owning households in the U.S. call rats (or gerbils, mice or hamsters) pets,¹ but this may change if more people got to know them. Intelligent, inquisitive and affectionate, rats are charming and playful, and can learn to come when you call them.

You can teach pet rats to learn tricks, too, and, contrary to popular belief, rats aren't dirty — they're actually very clean. So if you're considering adding a small pet to your family, here are six reasons why a rat (or two) may be the best choice for you.

6 Reasons to Adopt a Pet Rat

1. **Rats are intelligent** — Rats, like humans, can make decisions based on what they do or do not know. Studies also show that rats are surprisingly self-aware and social creatures who form strong bonds with their owners.

They learn their names and come when they're called, and they beg for time out of their cage to play and interact with their owners. Many rats will also "groom" their owners, which is a sign of affection.

For the record, recent research suggests mice are equally as intelligent as rats.² Rats are even capable of showing regret when they make bad choices.³

2. **Rats show empathy** — Adding to the complexity of pet rats is their ability to be empathetic. In a study published in 2011, researchers placed a free rat in an arena with a cage-mate trapped in a restrainer. The free rat quickly learned how to set the trapped rat free.

The real test came in, however, when the free rat was given the choice of either freeing the trapped rat or opening a restrainer containing chocolate.⁴ The free rats, in the latter case, freed the rat and the chocolate, and even shared the treat together. As written in *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*:⁵

“Empathy is a phenomenon often considered dependent on higher-order emotional control and an ability to relate to the emotional state of others. It is, by many, attributed only to species having well-developed cortical circuits capable of performing such complex tasks.

However, over the years, a wealth of data has been accumulated showing that rodents are capable not only of sharing emotional states of their conspecifics, but also of prosocial behavior driven by such shared experiences.”

3. **Rats are fastidiously clean** — Rats don't typically need to be bathed, as they're fastidious groomers. Not only do they like to keep their fur clean, but they also tend to keep their food organized into tidy piles.⁶ Rats also groom each other, keeping clean all those hard-to-reach places.
4. **Rats are affectionate** — Every rat has his own personality, but in general rats enjoy the companionship of humans (and other rats). Many rats enjoy being petted while some enjoy perching on your shoulder.

Rats will often cuddle up on your lap (especially males) and some even play games like peek-a-boo. Female rats tend to be more active than male rats.

5. **Rats like to be tickled** — It's been scientifically proven that the high-frequency chirping noises rats make when tickled is a form of laughter. What's more, rats bond with the person who tickles them and make them laugh.⁷
6. **Rats are quiet and don't require much space** — Aside from occasional pleasant squeaks and chattering, rats are very quiet, which is another reason why many people, especially those living in apartments, believe rats make good pets.

They also require a relatively small amount of space — a minimum of 2 cubic feet of cage space for each rat (rats do best with at least one same-sex buddy) or 1 cubic feet of space for a mouse.⁸

That being said, rats enjoy spending time outside of their cages with their owners, and they also require ample room to move around for stimulation (so consider multiple levels, hammocks, tunnels, ramps, shelves and other areas of interest).

Rats Are Not 'Throwaway' Pets

Rats and mice are often considered to be “starter” pets that are easy to care for and require little time or emotional commitment. This is not the case, however, as these animals require daily interactions, feeding (including preparation of fresh foods) and exercise.

Your rats' cage must be thoroughly cleaned at least once a week, and they require veterinary care if they become ill. In fact, to stay well, rats should receive regular check-ups with a veterinarian who cares for rats.

Rats may not be the best choice for families with young children, who may handle the animal too roughly and are at an increased risk from zoonotic diseases (the same is true for people with compromised immune systems).

If you decide to adopt a pet rat or two, there are many available — in all different colors, such as blue, lilac, Siamese and champagne, at rat rescue organizations. There are even hairless rats, tailless rats, curly-haired rats and rats with big ears.

How do you know which rat pair is right for you? Contact a local rescue in your area — they'll be able to describe the rats' personalities and help you find the best match for your family.

Sources and References

¹ [AZ Central March 15, 2010](#)

² [Front. Syst. Neurosci., September 18, 2014](#)

³ [Nature Neuroscience 17, 995–1002 \(2014\) doi: 10.1038/nn.3740](#)

⁴ [Science December 9, 2011](#)

⁵ [Neurosci Biobehav Rev. November 4, 2016](#)

⁶ [VetStreet July 23, 2015](#)

⁷ [Behav Brain Res. 2000 Oct;115\(1\):25-38](#)

⁸ [PetMD](#)
