

Rat care guide



woodgreen

Helping pets and their people

Introduction to rats

So, you're thinking about getting some rats? In this guide, you'll find lots of useful information about how to care for them and everything else to help you decide if they're the right pet for you (we hope they are). And if you already have rats, you might learn something new!

At Woodgreen, we know that owning pet rats can be very rewarding. These fun, loveable, intelligent creatures will keep you entertained with endless exploring of their surroundings. They really enjoy interacting with humans too – what's not to love?

While most pet rats like to keep busy, in general females are known to be the most active, whereas males are more partial to a cuddle on the sofa – just some food for thought when you get to choosing your furry friends.

Fast facts

Male name: Buck. **Female name:** Doe. **Group of rats:** Mischief.

Life expectancy: Two to three years.

Companionship: Ideally, rats should be housed in a group of at least three as they're happier when they've got some pals. This also helps prevent one from being left alone if one passes away.

Accommodation: Rats need to be housed in a large cage filled with suitable enrichment to keep them interested and active. They won't settle for anything less!

Diet: They're omnivores and should be fed a home-made, well-balanced diet of mixed seeds, grains, meat and vegetable sources.

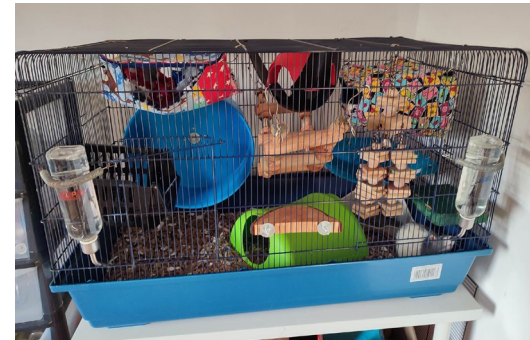
Health: Rats can be prone to breathing issues and occasionally parasites, so choosing the right bedding is very important. Tumours and benign masses are also very common in rats. Make sure you have a rat savvy vet on hand in case your rats need veterinary attention.

[Click here](#) for more information.

Family friendly: Did you know rats can be excellent pets for all the family? Their inquisitive, affectionate and playful nature make them the perfect pet! As if you needed more reasons to consider getting pet rats, there are actually more to read [here](#).

Accommodation

As we've mentioned, rats are extremely inquisitive. In fact, they take the word to a whole new level! They love nothing more than climbing, exploring and learning about their surroundings. So, that's why it's really important you provide your rats with a suitable sized enclosure. And it should include plenty of fun things to keep them fit and healthy.



The minimum cage size for up to four rats:

80cm high by 50cm deep by 80cm wide.

Bar spacing 1cm.



The minimum cage size for up to 10 rats:

123cm high (without stand) by 63cm deep by 93cm wide.

Bar spacing 1cm.





Where to place your cage

When you're choosing a location for your rat cage, make sure it's:

- away from windows and draughts.
- away from heat sources such as radiators, or ensure they're switched off.
- away from direct/constant sunlight, although the room will need a natural daylight source.
- safe from other pets such as cats and dogs.
- safe from young, unsupervised children.
- away from constant loud noise such as the TV or music system.
- in a location that ensures plenty of socialising with humans.

Free-range time

Once your rats have bonded with you and settled into a routine, you can start to allow them free-range time several times a week in a rat-safe room or secure playpen. This will enable you to sit and socialise with them. You can also set up the space with lots of different toys for them to explore and interact with.

Rats are super smart and can easily be trained using small amounts of their favourite treats.

Try making your own agility courses or teach them how to do tricks like fetching items and weaving in and out of objects.

Need some inspiration? Watch this handy [video](#).

Enrichment

Rats will happily spend hours each day exploring and investigating their surroundings – it's just what they do! So it may not come as a surprise to you that these busy creatures are also great at climbing. For this reason, make sure you provide them with lots of toys and activities both in and out of their cage. This will help to keep them fit, healthy and happy.

Your rats will enjoy:

- **Pipes and tunnels** for running through.
- **Climbing frames** like old wine racks and metal CD towers.
- **Hammocks and ropes.** Rats love sleeping together in hammocks and both can be purchased or homemade. [Click here](#) to find out how to make your own.
- **Sputniks** – various-sized, plastic hides that can be hung from the ceiling of the cage.
- **Cardboard boxes**, all shapes and sizes. Cut a few holes in them for added exploring fun.
- **Parrot toys and perches** to encourage balancing, jumping and chewing
- **Minimum 12" extra-large solid exercise rat wheel** (but many rats will require and prefer larger).
- **Pea fishing** – a nice activity for hot summer days. Add a shallow dish of cool water to their cage, and float some green peas or sweetcorn in for the rats to fish out.
- **Litter trays** are ideal if you would like to litter train your rats. Place one under a favourite hammock, as they tend to use the toilet as soon

as they get up. Use one to three corner trays placed around the cage and on different levels.

- **Dig trays.** As well as digging substrate in the base of their cage, why not give them a storage box filled with a different substrate (see the next page), or even Coco soil for them to dig through and forage for food!

For more enrichment ideas, visit:

furrynatural.com
Ratcessories Pet Toys
minipetz.co.uk
northernparrots.com

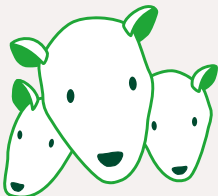
Top tip – use shower curtain hooks to attach hammocks and toys to your cage.



Substrate and bedding materials

Like us humans, rats like a comfy bed. And it's vital to use the correct bedding and substrate for your rats, otherwise it could have a negative effect on their health. Sawdust and most standard wood shavings sold in pet shops can be harmful to your rats' skin and airway, and can give you an allergic reaction too!

Below is a list of suitable bedding materials for your rat cage.

Substrate options (for the base of the cage)	Nesting/comfy bedding to place in hiding spaces	Litter trays
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shredded card material e.g. Ecobale, Pillow Wad Eco-Nest, Greenmile. • Hemp bedding such as Aubiose (non-fragranced). • Bedmax/Littlemax – kiln dried and dust extracted shavings for horses. • Bioactive coco soil/ coco coir for digging. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White, soft tissue paper bedding such as tea bag bedding.* • Fleece or towels. • Dust extracted hay. <p>*Avoid cotton-wool type bedding - this can be very dangerous as it can get tightly wrapped around their body, tail and legs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-fragranced paper pellets e.g. Back to Nature. 





Cleaning

Keeping your rats' cage clean is key to preventing serious health conditions such as respiratory problems and bumble foot – a very painful foot infection.

Daily – spot clean	Fortnightly – refresh clean
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pick up poo and wet/dirty bedding and substrate. 2. Replace dirty bedding and substrate. 3. Remove any fresh food (e.g. veg) they haven't eaten from the previous day. 4. Change their water. 5. Clean any used litter trays every other day (or less frequently depending on your number of rats), discarding the used litter. Wash and dry the tray before placing in clean litter. 6. Wipe down any plastic surfaces that have been urinated on, replacing any enrichment that has become smelly such as hammocks - these will need replacing weekly, or sometimes twice weekly. 	<p>This may need to be done more often depending on the number of rats you have in the cage:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Place your rats in a secure plastic cat carrier with plenty of bedding and substrate in from their cage. Position the carrier in a safe, quiet space away from where you're cleaning. 2. Remove toys, enrichment, bowls, bottles and clean them with pet-friendly disinfectant. 3. For any hammocks or ropes, wash in your washing machine with non-bio detergent at 60°C. 4. Fully sweep out their cage and wipe down with pet-friendly disinfectant. 5. Set up your rats' enclosure with fresh bedding and substrate and place different toys in the cage for interest and to allow them to use the whole space within the cage.. <p>Top tip – place any items that need to be machine washed into an old pillow case or a laundry bag. This will stop rat hair and any metal clips from clogging up or damaging the machine.</p>

Rat companionship



Rats are social butterflies and need the companionship of other rats to truly thrive. Lone rats crave this attention so will often become depressed or display aggressive, nervous or over-affectionate behaviour. If you find yourself with a lone rat of any age, contact Woodgreen or your local rescue centre to help find your rat a companion.

Three is the magic number

When it comes to the number of rats you should keep, three (or more) is ideal. This means they will create their own social network, which maintains a healthy dynamic. Having more than two can also help to prevent a rat

from being left on their own if one passes away.

Suitable combinations

It's usually best to keep rats in same-sex groups. However, males can be castrated if they display hormone related behaviours and successfully mixed back with their male friends, or with females.

Female rats can also be neutered if they're displaying hormonal behaviour. If they still can't be mixed then they can live with males, either neutered or entire. An experienced, rat-friendly vet can neuter your rats.

See [page 19](#) for more details.

Introducing your rats to each other

If you find yourself with a lone rat, or you'd like to increase the size of your mischief, Woodgreen can help! We have an onsite mixing service which could introduce your rat (or rats) to a new companion or three. This happens through mixing onsite or by providing you with advice to enable you to mix them at home. For more information, please [click here](#).

Mixing methods

Unlike other small pet species, introducing rats is best done in a smaller neutral space which doesn't contain the scent of any of the rats. This reduces the chance of potentially dangerous fights starting out. It also encourages mutual feeding, grooming and the building of strong relationships quicker.

Always start mixes early in the morning so you have plenty of time to monitor initial interactions.

There are a couple of different mixing methods you can try, for more mixing advice [click here](#).



Feeding your rats

What to feed

As rats are omnivores, they need both protein and vegetables in their diet. There are many rat complete mixes available to purchase, but finding one that meets their exact requirements is tricky. We recommend the great homemade rat food mixes available from ratrations.co.uk, which include mixes for the different stages of their life.

Lots of rat owners choose to make their own rat food – making sure their rats get everything they need. See [page 15](#) for a simple homemade rat food recipe which Woodgreen use for our rats. If you'd like to learn more about making your own mixes, you can't go wrong with the book: **The Scuttling Gourmet: A Guide to Wholesome Nutrition for Rats** by Alison Campbell

How much to feed

Feed your rats around 15g of dried food each, per day (around two tablespoons each).

Rats are scavengers – they love to forage for food and tasty treats. So mix it up by scattering their daily allowance around their cage and hiding treats in toys or interesting items. You can also make your own toys to hide some of their food in, like these [Rodent crackers](#).

Healthy treats (to be fed in moderation):

- Small amounts of fresh chopped fruit and vegetables such as strawberries, banana, carrot, celery, peas, kale, pear, melon, grapes.
- Boiled chicken on the bone – offer them a leg bone with some meat on.
- Rice or pasta (cooked or raw).
- Boiled eggs.
- Dry bread.
- Cat food – meat in jelly or gravy. Use this to help you when giving any medication to your rats.
- Wholegrain low sugar cereal (less than 5% sugars) such as oat cheerios.

For more ideas of what you can feed rats and what should be avoided, [click here](#).



Water

It's important your rats have access to daily, fresh, clean water. Ideally, provide this in two bottles or securely mounted bowls, at each at each end of the cage, or across both levels if you have a large two-tier cage, in case one breaks.





Homemade rat food recipe

If you'd like to have a go at making a healthy mix for your pet rats, below is a basic recipe we use at Woodgreen that will suit rats of all ages. Once you've made your mix, store it in a suitable container with an airtight lid. Note down the date you made the mix, and aim to use it within three months.

You will need:

- 10 scoops of **base mix**
- 5 scoops of **processed grains**
- 2 scoops of **protein source**
- 2 scoops of **dried herbs and vegetables**
- 1 scoop of **healthy seeds**

Base mix – a mixture of the following:

- Dodson & Horrell Conditioning Mix
- Mr Johnson's Special 'No Added Pellets' Rabbit Food
- Allen & Page Green Pea Mix for rabbits
- Extra Select Premium Large Pea Rabbit Food

Processed grains – a mixture of at least three of the following:

- Low sugar (less than 5% sugar) breakfast cereal e.g. Lidl/Sainsburys Cornflakes, Aldi Wheat Biscuits, Morrisons Puffed Wheat, Oat Cheerios, Tesco/Asda Rice Snaps
- Dried egg noodles
- Dried pasta or spaghetti
- Wholegrain rice
- Plain rice crackers
- Plain popcorn (no added sugar, salt, oils etc)

Protein source – a mixture of the following:

- Fish based dog kibble (no meat/animal derivatives and at least 20-25% protein)
- Dried insects/shrimp/fish
- Roasted soya beans
- Lentils
- Mealworms (only in small amounts due to fat content)

Dried herbs and vegetables:

- Burgess wildflower forage
- Burgess Luscious leaves forage
- Pets at Home Dried Vegetable Mix
- Pets at Home Crunchy Dried Beetroot and Parsnip Mix
- Naturals Rosewood Herbs Plus

Healthy seeds – a mixture of the following:

- Wild bird seed mix
- Parrot seed mix
- Sunflower seeds (only small amounts due to fat content)
- Peanuts (only small amounts due to fat content)
- Pumpkin seeds
- Linseed
- Hempseed

Handling your rats

When taking your new furry friends home, allow them to settle for a day or two before regular handling and time out of the cage. New owners and environments can be very intimidating for a rat, possibly resulting in a bite.



Let them come to you

Your rats will find it more enjoyable and relaxing to climb and sit on your arms and shoulders rather than being held. Have some tasty treats on hand to encourage them to come towards the front of the cage, then place your arm out for them to climb onto. If your rat is a little timid, encourage them to walk into a tunnel and allow them to climb out onto your lap in their own time.

How to pick your rats up

Rats can feel threatened by the sight of a hand suddenly hovering above them when they're resting. Those who have bonded with their owner are often very inquisitive and will come to the door of the cage or stand on the edge of their hammocks, ready for you. When picking them up:



- Ensure they're awake, alert and aware of your movements. Quietly talking to them can make them aware that you're there.
- Gently but confidently place one hand underneath them behind their front legs.
- Lift and support their rear end with the other hand, placing the rat into your arms.
- Have some tasty treats to hand!

Never try to pick rats up by their tail – this can result in damage or even loss of the tail.

Wear cosy clothing

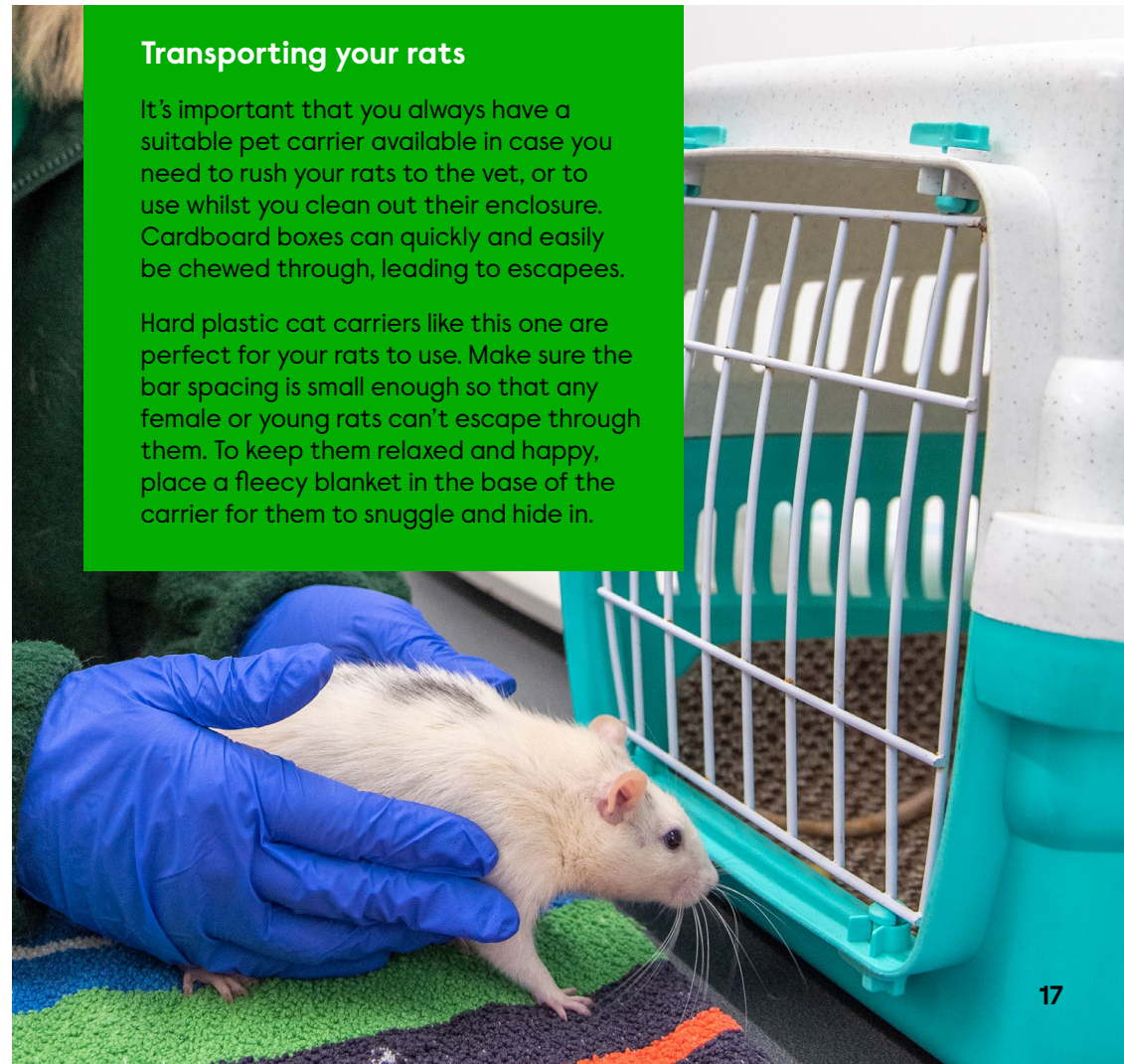
Wearing a baggy hoody or a dressing gown during free-range time is always popular with rats. They can sit and snuggle with you once they've had enough of exploring – or use you as a safe space to return to if they're not feeling confident outside of their accommodation.



Transporting your rats

It's important that you always have a suitable pet carrier available in case you need to rush your rats to the vet, or to use whilst you clean out their enclosure. Cardboard boxes can quickly and easily be chewed through, leading to escapes.

Hard plastic cat carriers like this one are perfect for your rats to use. Make sure the bar spacing is small enough so that any female or young rats can't escape through them. To keep them relaxed and happy, place a fleecy blanket in the base of the carrier for them to snuggle and hide in.





The healthy rat

Health checking your rats

To keep your rats in tip top condition, make sure you health check them weekly and look out for any changes in their behaviour every day – rats can be very good at hiding any health issues until they're really suffering. If you have any concerns, act quickly and contact your rat savvy vet. Watch our video on how to health check them and what to look out for woodgreen.org.uk/pet-advice/rats/rat-health/

Finding a vet

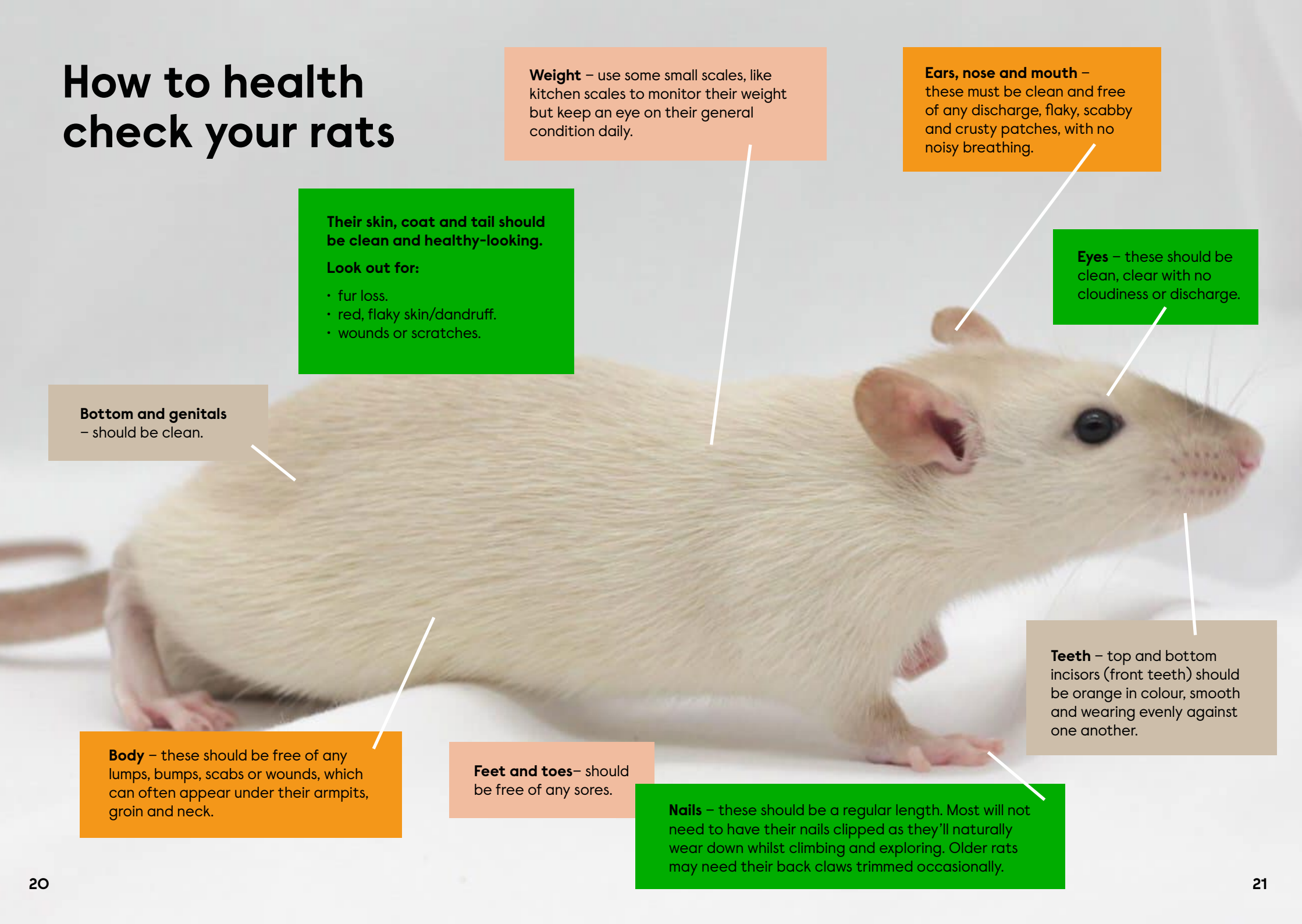
When it comes to your rats' care, it's really important to find a vet in your area who has lots of experience with rats. Most vets will see cats and dogs on a daily basis and will have an extensive knowledge of their needs. Other species such as rats will rarely be seen by most vets. So finding someone who has lots of experience of seeing, diagnosing and treating these species is vital.

- **Look for an Exotics Veterinary Practice** – they may have more experience and be cheaper in the long term than other vets. Look [here](#) to find a rat friendly vet in your area: **Rat Vet Reviews UK | Facebook**

- **Talk to friends and family** who own or have owned rats to see if there are any vets they recommend.
- **Talk to veterinary practices** themselves to find out if there are any rat savvy vets within the practice. Don't be afraid to ask them how many they see on a weekly basis to help you decide whether they're the right vet for you.



How to health check your rats



Weight – use some small scales, like kitchen scales to monitor their weight but keep an eye on their general condition daily.

Ears, nose and mouth – these must be clean and free of any discharge, flaky, scabby and crusty patches, with no noisy breathing.

Their skin, coat and tail should be clean and healthy-looking.

Look out for:

- fur loss.
- red, flaky skin/dandruff.
- wounds or scratches.

Eyes – these should be clean, clear with no cloudiness or discharge.

Bottom and genitals – should be clean.

Teeth – top and bottom incisors (front teeth) should be orange in colour, smooth and wearing evenly against one another.

Body – these should be free of any lumps, bumps, scabs or wounds, which can often appear under their armpits, groin and neck.

Feet and toes – should be free of any sores.

Nails – these should be a regular length. Most will not need to have their nails clipped as they'll naturally wear down whilst climbing and exploring. Older rats may need their back claws trimmed occasionally.



Common illnesses

Lumps, bumps and tumours

Sadly, tumours and benign masses are very common in rats, especially females. These can develop as young as a year old, so health check your rats regularly as explained above/previous page. [Click here](#) to find out more.

Breathing problems

Respiratory infections are also a very common illness in rats. These are caused by bacteria in the respiratory tract, which makes the rat unwell. Pre-existing respiratory conditions in rats can be exacerbated by stress, as a result of poor ventilation, dusty substrate, change in temperatures, predators in the home, bullying by other rats and old age.

Along with medical support from your vet, choosing suitable substrate, cleaning the cage to a high standard, washing the hammocks and bars of the cage, keeping it well ventilated and predators away, will all help prevent and manage this illness.

[Click here](#) to find out more.

Neutering your rats

Although rats are typically not neutered, it's possible and could have many benefits. Some rats become hormonally aggressive and get into spats with one another, or take it out on people. In these cases, neutering can stop this behaviour and can also help them stay in a bonded pair or group. If you do choose to neuter your rats, choose an experienced vet.



Looking for more expert pet advice?

We cover a range of different topics on our website – and not just for your small furry friends, but cats and dogs, too!

Not only that, but we also offer phone appointments, workshops, training classes, webinars and courses.

Find out more at [**woodgreen.org.uk**](https://www.woodgreen.org.uk),
call **0300 303 9333**
or email [**info@woodgreen.org.uk**](mailto:info@woodgreen.org.uk)



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