

RAT CARE: CAGES AND HOUSING

by Victoria Johnson



Criteria for Rat Cages Size/Structure

Rats are very active creatures. They need appropriate space to climb, play, have enclosures/hides placed, and have enrichment items scattered throughout the cage. It is also important to have a cage size that is appropriate for the number of rats being housed. Cages should have good ventilation and not be in direct lines of air flow or sunlight.

- Spaces between bars should NOT exceed ½" as any wider can cause heads or bodies to get stuck leading to injuries, death, or rats that escape.
- Fish tanks or other enclosures with solid walls are NOT acceptable for rats. They do not provide proper ventilation—even with a good top. Without proper ventilation, rats will be prone to respiratory infections and other health issues.
- Metal is recommended for permanent housing. Wood should never be used for a rat cage. Rats can chew through the enclosure and escape. Pee in wood enclosures will be difficult to clean and replacement would be necessary in short time. Plastic, though easier than wood to clean, can be chewed through so be cautious and check plastic for damage. Plastic for transport purposes or temporary housing is suitable.
- Easy accessibility to the rats will be important for housing Barn Hunt rats. The bigger the doors, the better. This will also help with cleaning.

Never have wire flooring in cages to avoid bumblefoot or other health issues.

*Do not confuse the **Critter Nation** with the **Ferret Nation** which has 1" vertical spacing between the bars. This is a safety hazard for the rats as the width allows rat heads or bodies to get stuck leading to injuries, death, or rats that escape. If a Ferret Nation or other cage with larger than ½" bar spacing is used, securely wrap it with wire mesh. Mesh can be expensive.*

Recommended Cage

The Critter Nation cage (not Ferret Nation) is the best and most commonly used cage for rats. It has ½" horizontal bar spacing (aids in rat climbing and is the proper width of bar spacing for rat safety), large front doors, is easy to clean, and easy to attach food bowls/water bottles and enrichment items to. Deep metal trays or other tub options for the bottom floor is highly recommended to replace the flat plastic bottom tray the cage comes with. Deep metal trays, or other tub bottoms, allow for deeper bedding and can be bought separately.

- Critter Nation Dimensions:
 - Single Story - 36" x 24" x 39"
 - Two Story - 36" x 24" x 63"
 - Bar Spacing: 1/2"

How Many Rats in a Cage?

The commonly stated rule is one rat per two cubic feet of space—this is not a completely accurate way to look at how many rats per cage size. For example, a common cage seen when housing rats at trials, transport, or use as a hospital cage is 25.5" x 12.5" x 14," which is 2.5 cubic feet. While satisfactory for temporary housing at trials, transport, or as a hospital cage after procedures, this size is **not** acceptable for even a single rat to be housed in as a permanent enclosure. There is very little room for the rat to move around, climb, have enrichment, play, etc.

The Critter Nation as an example for rat number in a cage

A single story Critter Nation cage is large enough to house four to six average size rats without overcrowding. One more **may** be appropriate depending on the sizes of the rats and how the space is utilized.

A double story Critter Nation cage appropriately houses up to eight to 12 average sized rats. More than 12 is not recommended because of ammonia buildup.

Rat Cage Placement/Environment

Rats should be housed in an indoor environment on a regular basis (appropriate accommodations during trials may be needed). The environment should be as dust free as possible (it is **highly** recommended that rat cages be placed in a separate room from the Barn Hunt room/ring for dust purposes – dust can cause respiratory problems and stress in rats).

- Climate control should be installed and utilized.
- Temperature should be kept relatively stable and be between 70 and 75 degrees. Temperatures exceeding 85 degrees are considered dangerous and can cause heat stroke in rats; some rats show signs of heat exhaustion as low as 80 degrees. Rats are fairly cold tolerant for short periods but temperatures in the rat room should be at least 60 degrees.
- Rat room(s) should be well ventilated, free of drafts, dry, and not musty. Leave space around the cage to allow for indirect air flow through most of the cage.
- Avoid placing the cage(s) in an area where drafts from AC/heater/fan/other airflow units are prominent. If this is unavoidable, do something to disperse the airflow such as a topper on the top of the cage, something in the path of the airflow, a dampener, or adjusting where vents are directed.
- Avoid direct sunlight on cages.
- Rats are sensitive to sudden temperature swings. They do not regulate their body temperature well. Having sun shining into their cage can increase the temperature in the cage and can lead to rats overheating or pendulum swinging between warm and cool temperatures which can increase chances of illness.
- Rats are sensitive to bright light. If sunlight is shining into their cage, this will affect their eyesight and cause stress.
- Electronics (computers, tv's, wi-fi routers, etc.) should be kept away from rats if possible. Electronics can emit high pitched frequencies that can stress rats. Exceptions may include air purifiers or possibly a camera.
- The cage/environment should be free of harsh/toxic chemicals/oils.
- Chemicals used or stored near rats can damage respiratory systems, lead to toxicity issues, and even death.
- Cigarette smoke is extremely toxic to rats and can quickly cause severe health problems.

IF IT'S COLD

Provide more bedding, extra beds/hammocks, more hiding places

Add in fleece and/or natural/untreated packing paper

A heat pad may be used (use with caution as the pad can warm up too much); use only if appropriate and with supervision; make sure the rats do not overheat

Portable heater (use with caution/supervision—never point directly at the rats; allow the air to circulate in the room indirectly)

Move rats to a warmer place

Close any windows/curtains (blackout curtains can help keep room warmer)

IF IT'S HOT

Provide ice (not chemical filled ice-packs) in a plastic/glass container or water bottles in the cage so rats can choose to stay close to it (never freeze glass with lids on)—only use water ice in case the rats were to chew through plastic and get to any ice-packs with chemicals

Freeze or chill a piece of terracotta tile or similar, and place it in the cage

Freeze a cloth and place it in a tray inside the cage

Freeze a large bottle of water and put a fan behind it to make a low budget AC (remember not to blow directly on the rats)

Play pea fishing with frozen vegetables that are rat safe

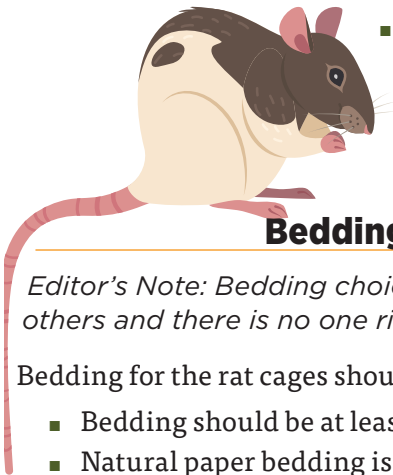
Mist the rats with room temperature water (not cold or hot)—avoid misting their eyes and do not soak them unless heat stroke is present

Have access to plenty of water; may need more changes to stay cool—do not give freezing water

Move rats to a cooler location

Open a window (be cautious of drafts or pollutants from outside)

Close the curtains during the day (blackout curtains can help with keeping the heat from the sun out)



- Avoid the use of essential oils, incense, or fragrances of any kind; essential oils can be toxic and enter in the rat's system differently than other external fragrances—especially if diffused or applied to a rat topically.
- Use only rat safe cleaners around the rats such as a vinegar/water mix or natural small animal cage cleaner.

Bedding

Editor's Note: Bedding choices can be somewhat controversial. Some breeders prefer specific bedding over others and there is no one right bedding choice.

Bedding for the rat cages should be as dust free as possible using safe natural materials.

- Bedding should be at least 3"– 4" deep to allow for foraging, digging, and prevention of ammonia build up.
- Natural paper bedding is a good option and can be easily used for litter tubes; Care Fresh is a good option.
- Avoid paper bedding with fragrances, dyes, or that have been treated with bleach or other harsh chemicals (recycled paper can have chemicals in them from the recycle process).
- Hemp bedding is a highly recommended bedding amongst rat owners; it can have dust initially, but the dust usually falls to the bottom of the packaging easily if it is shaken before dumping.
- Avoid aspen, cedar, pine, and dusty bedding. Pine bedding is not recommended unless kiln-dried; it is still debated even then due to the potential for toxins to still be left over. Cedar is toxic, aspen is dusty.
- Fleece should be avoided for use as the dominant bedding as it does not absorb odors well and must be changed frequently; using fleece for a blanket/bed or in a hospital cage after a procedure is very acceptable.

Litter Box/Tray Training

While not always a practical option for every situation, rats can be litter box/tray trained! This can help with ease of cleaning, odor, and general cleanliness. There are many sources online for detailed instructions on how to litter box train. Below is a basic outline:

- Choose a small litter tray/box that can comfortably fit at least one rat. Trays are often made to go in corners of cages which is a favorite spot for most rats. It is a good idea to place more than one in the cage—especially in the back corners and/or near where beds are—to encourage rats to pee outside their bed instead of in them.
- Add substrate that is different from normal bedding; NEVER use regular cat litter as it is dusty and if ingested, can cause severe blockages in rats.
- Add a "pee rock" to the tray/box on top of the substrate (any rock—like a river rock—that has been properly cleaned and dried). Rats will enjoy marking and peeing on it; this encourages them to pee in the litter tray/box.
- For poop training, add poop turds that the rat has already excreted to the tray/box so it smells like a place to "go". Put as many poops that do not make it into the tray/box back into it so the rat makes the connection that poop goes in the tray/box.

Over time, rats will make the connection that pee and poop go in the litter tray/box and not elsewhere in the cage. Note that some rats will keep this very consistent and some rats may still have the occasional mark or accident outside of the litter tray/box. If trained correctly, most rats will keep the cage much more tidy/clean than without it.

Litter trays/boxes should be cleaned regularly—usually a daily scoop-out of obvious poop/pee is recommended and a thorough cleaning once a week when cleaning cages. Adjust cleaning time-frames depending on the number of rats and absorbency of the material used.

Cage Cleaning

Cage cleaning should happen once a week, especially for larger groups, to prevent ammonia build up. Smaller rat groups can be changed between a week to ten days. Too frequent cage changes (for example, every three to four days) can actually increase urine marking and cause cages to stink more quickly and stress the rats out.

Only use rat safe cleaners that are natural with no harsh chemicals. Avoid cleaners with fragrances/essential oils. Avoid cleaners with fragrances/essential oils. Rinse off cleaner completely and allow all pieces to dry before adding new bedding and putting rats back in the cage.

- Vinegar/water mix (Never use vinegar/water when cleaning tubes as it can erode the glue)
- Nature's Miracle small animal cage cleaner
- Others as researched for safety

Cage Set-up Environment

Rats love lots of **stuff** in their cage. They are very active, love to climb, loop through items, hide, tunnel, chew, cross bridges, surf ropes, tear up/use crinkled natural kraft paper, etc. Providing a wide variety of rat appropriate items in their cage is highly encouraged. Rats feel safer and less stressed if they have lots of places to hide. They are prey animals which means that constantly being out in the open can stress them out. Create a lot of “clutter”, essentially, and have lots of items/hides they can utilize in their cage. Provide ample amounts/variety of chews and enrichment chew blocks/hangers.

- **Climbs:** Make sure they have lots of ways to climb. Give them bridges, ladders, bird ropes, platforms, baskets, hammocks, etc. so they can climb around, get exercise, and have fun.
- **Fall Breakers:** It is important that you have items that serve as “fall breakers” in your cage. Since rats love to climb, they also have a higher chance to fall. Items such as hammocks, tie hangers/bird cage ring nets, platforms, ramps, bird ropes, etc. attached in various places/heights in the cage can provide fall breakers for them. Watch how the rats utilize items in your cage. Make sure there are no long drop zones as much as possible. Secure items with safe hooks (the “c” shaped shower curtain rings are often great for this; whatever is used, make sure they cannot get feet or heads stuck in them).
- **Water bottles:** It is imperative that rats have constant access to water and that there is plenty of it. If smaller bottles are used, hang two or more in the cage if the mischief is medium to large in number. Hang water bottles at a height where rats do not need to bend down to get the water, but is not too high where they have to stretch far to reach it. Bottles should be relatively straight on or a little higher.

