

# RAT CARE: INTEGRATION

by Victoria Johnson



**Rats are social creatures who usually require a minimum of one other rat in their mischief and often thrive on more. It is rare to have a rat housed alone and should be an exception, not the rule.**

When integrating rats that are not from the same litter/mischief (and even those from the same litter/mischief that have been separated for a time), use appropriate integration procedures. **Do not rush integration.** Not taking time to do proper integration will often result in fights, territorial disputes, injury, and undue stress that could have been avoided. It is rare for rats who are new to each other or have been separated from each other for a time to integrate without any issues.

## Scent Swapping

Rats rely heavily on scent for many aspects of life including recognition of other rats. Before meeting rats that are not from the same litter/mischief or reintroducing rats that used to be in a litter/mischief, it is helpful to swap items from both sides so they become familiar with each other via scent. This will also allow scents to integrate together in the territory. Objects made from porous materials are particularly good at holding odor. They include beds/blankets, chews, ropes, and hides. Scent Swapping can be used in conjunction with other integration methods.

## Neutral Territory

Allowing the rats to meet in a neutral territory may be an appropriate option. With a neutral territory, the rats have little or no previous association with the area and will not feel the need to protect it. The smaller the neutral area the better. If the area is too large and the rats get in a squabble, they often run after each other and the injuries could be worse.

It is important to choose an enclosure that is rat safe, where there are no places for the rats to hide or get stuck under, and easy to get in and separate the rats if needed (have a piece of cardboard or a plastic lid ready, to avoid getting bitten, in case intervention is needed to break up a fight or help ease tension). Examples:

- Bathtub with towels laid down flat (make sure all soaps are put away and there is no access to toxic or dangerous substances or objects)
- A smaller cage with new bedding
- A rat safe enclosure

A typical rule of thumb is “no blood no foul.” It is normal for rats to get a little puffy, pin each other down, and/or have some squeaks or small squabbles. They are just trying to figure each other out and establish status with each other. If aggression is too intense, intervene by splitting the rats up using a piece of cardboard/plastic lid.

*New rats should be monitored and quarantined away from current rats (a separate room is recommended ideally not connected with the same ventilation) for two weeks to make sure any health issues do not arise. Always wash hands between handling new and current rats.*

*Placing food or treats in or on swapped object(s) can further positive association.*

*Previous scent swapping is beneficial for the neutral territory and carrier methods.*

## Carrier Method

The Carrier Method is the most common and often safest/most efficient method for rat integration. Put the rats in a small enclosure, such as a carrier cage or small temporary housing cage, so they are in close vicinity with each other. The rats will be more inclined to cuddle than to squabble. This helps with bonding and reduces the chance of injuries as rats often do not like to fight when they have little room to do so.

Start by letting the rats hang out with each other for a time in a small cage/enclosure. Gradually expand the size of the cage/



enclosure as they get more comfortable with each other. If at any point, the rats start fighting (not just pinning down, small squeaks, or a little puffy), go back to a smaller cage/enclosure for a while longer and/or let the rats be in their own enclosure to settle for a while before putting together again. If fighting continues to happen, then look at other methods.

While most rats do well with this method, if either rat(s) is elderly or frail, this may or may not be the best option for them. Also, a more aggressive rat that is likely to fight no matter what size of cage/enclosure they are in may not benefit from this method.