

RAT CARE: HANDLING, EXERCISE, ENRICHMENT



Rats need interaction, exercise, and enrichment. Interacting with rats both verbally and physically along with making sure rats are given physical opportunities to climb, items to weave through, jump over, walk on, and hide on in is important for both their physical and mental well-being.

Interaction—Know Your Rats!

Knowing/Interacting with each rat individually both during and outside of Barn Hunt play is very important for Barn Hunt rats as it will:

- Increase bonds.
- Keep rats happy/low stress.
- Make rats be more willing to play Barn Hunt.
- Give the care giver/instructor baselines for how each rat looks, acts, and moves (will assist in spotting health issues/injuries).
- Allow for observing what kind of play in Barn Hunt each rat prefers:
 - Some rats enjoy playing for longer; some for shorter.
 - Some rats enjoy being in the quarry/intro cage for dogs to see, others would prefer the tube only.
 - Some rats want to be hidden in the hay for the dogs to find, others also like being more exposed.
- Allow for rat personality assessment as some rats enjoy Barn Hunt but others do not. Rats that hide when the tube is presented, bite when being picked up, or are stressed and will not eat a treat after playing Barn Hunt may need to not play (a suitable home situation should be found or just allow the rat to be with its mischief while the other rats play).

Barn Hunt as Exercise/Enrichment

Rats are not just sitting in tubes asleep while playing Barn Hunt. They often have to be alert for tube movement. Learning to balance in tubes is part of rat training that is used during Barn Hunt play and is exercise/a workout both mentally and physically.

Make sure rats are not overworking when playing Barn Hunt and have breaks for food, water, and rest every two/three hours or so, depending on temperature, climate, and intensity of play.

- Various training books and materials are available for further information on training rats for Barn Hunt and utilizing rats in Barn Hunt trials and classes; all rats in Barn Hunt **must** have proper training before being used in any aspect of Barn Hunt.

PICKING UP/HOLDING RATS

The best methods for picking up a rat are to scoop with entire hand (or both hands) from underneath while supporting the chest and back end, or to pick the rat up from behind the shoulders wrapping the thumb and fingers gently to the underside behind the front legs (claw method). If using claw method, be sure to support the back end with the other hand (do not leave back feet dangling for long).

NEVER pick a rat up by the tail! *This can easily result in injury to the spine or even degloving (where the skin and underlying soft tissue are torn away from the underlying muscle, tendon, or bone). Degloving is extremely painful.*

Degloved rats MUST be seen by a vet immediately to assess for proper treatment and prevent infection (amputation is often required).



Other Exercise/Enrichment

While Barn Hunt is great enrichment/exercise for rats, it is highly encouraged to provide other sources of enrichment/exercise for rats' well-being such as the following:

Chews:

Rats have a great need to chew that benefits them mentally and physically. Rats' teeth continuously grow throughout their life; therefore, it is imperative to have various types of chews to help teeth stay worn down.

- Safe natural wood chews free from pesticides or unnatural dyes is highly recommended.
- Always check for potential use of pesticides or unnatural dyes in any chew item even with common name brands: Oxbow items are usually safe.

Cardboard/Paper:

Rats love to chew cardboard; avoid cardboard with inks, chemicals, or large amounts of glue on them. Make sure paper is untreated so rats do not ingest paper with bleach or other chemicals; bear in mind that recycled paper can have chemicals on it from the recycle process.

- Paper towel or toilet paper cores tend to be fun for them and are easily made into other enrichment toys.
- Natural (untreated) kraft paper is great for building materials and giving the rats something to shred and make bedding out of.

Ropes:

- Bird cage ropes are great fun for rats and can be used for making bridges, stairways, paths, etc. in their cage. Ropes will need to be changed periodically to prevent ammonia build up.

Hides:

Provide fun hides for your rats to relax/feel safe in.

- Make sure hides have good ventilation
- If making hides from canisters such as plastic coffee containers (great fun for many rats!), make sure to soak and clean the container thoroughly with rat safe cleaner and let dry to eliminate leftover odor from previous contents (may have to wash several times). Place the container out in the sun for extra help in this area if needed. Drill holes in the top for ventilation and cut out a "doorway" for them (check for sharp edges) for extra fun.

Ramps/Ladders/Bridges:

Many ramps, ladders, perches, or bridges can be found in the rodent, bird, or reptile section of most pet stores.

- Make sure materials are safe for rats.
- Avoid items rats can get tangled in.

Baskets:

Little plastic baskets that can be hung up with either the "C" shaped shower curtain rings or the hooks they come with (if you buy a formal one) if they are safe.

Lava Rock Ledges:

Great for platforms and helps with filing down nails.

- Make sure if it is colored, pet safe dye/paint is used.

Platforms:

Some cages come with platforms which can be utilized.

- There are ledges and platforms that can be bought to attach to different areas of a cage.
- Make sure ledges and platforms are secure and are not easily tipped.

Hammocks/Beds:

- Many rats love hanging out and sleeping in hammocks/beds.
- Hammocks/Beds will likely need to be changed out weekly to prevent ammonia build up if rats like to pee in their beds. If rats keep the beds clean, they may last longer.
- If washing hammocks/beds is desired vs replacement, wash in unscented natural detergent with no essential oils or added fragrances.
- Never use beds with stuffing inside as rats will often pull the stuffing out; this poses a risk of entanglement and ingestion and is very dangerous. Beds with stuffing should only be used with supervision during free roam time.
- Some rats love destroying their hammocks. If enough enrichment is provided other than their hammocks, they often leave them intact.
- If chewing is occurring, be mindful of loose strings or dangerous holes that rats could get caught in; discard if problems occur or they are looking dangerous.
- "C" shaped shower curtain rings are an easy and convenient way to attach hammocks/beds and are large enough that rats cannot get their feet or head caught in them (often, the little clips that come with hammocks/beds can be risky for rat feet depending on the shape).
 - The "C" shaped shower curtain rings are not closed circuit so removal of limbs/head is easy for the rat.

Puzzle toys:

Like dogs, rats love to solve puzzles.

- Some puzzles can be left in the cage, other puzzles need supervision, and some may be better to do during free-roam time.
- Puzzle toys can be homemade or store bought.
- Utilizing paper towel cores or cardboard egg cartons are fun options.

Pea Fishing:

- Have a small tray of water (not too deep; keep it shallow) and put thawed out frozen (cooked) peas or other safe vegetables in it; the rat(s) will enjoy fishing around and getting the peas out. This game is recommended to play outside of the cage to prevent excessive water from getting in the bedding; or play the game before a cage change occurs.

Ball Pits:

- Put plastic balls, or even fuzzy pom-pom balls, inside a box, container, etc. and let the rats have fun playing with them. Add snacks, if desired, to create a search and find game.

Dig Boxes:

A dig box is a box that can be put in a rat's cage and, if desired, filled with rat safe substrate such as sterile coco soil (kept slightly damp to keep dust down), shredded or cut up cardboard, Eco Earth animal soil (completely rat safe), etc. Rats love to dig and forage; providing a separate dig box in a cage can give them something extra special to do.

- Rat safe plants can be placed in the dig box (Basil, Wheatgrass, Rosemary, Thyme, or Cilantro—use of Eco Earth animal soil is often recommended).

Free Roaming:

When possible, it is a great idea to free roam your rats in a safe location where they cannot get into anything dangerous and nothing can get to them (other pets):

- Rats jump high and far and are amazing climbers; supervise carefully.
- A separate room, an area designated inside your rat room with the other cages, an enclosure rats cannot easily leave, or a pop-up tent are good options for free roaming.
- Set items of interest in the roaming area (items to climb, explore, play around on, chew, solve, etc.).
- Cat trees, boxes, plastic toys, puzzle toys, blankets, hides, other enrichment previously mentioned, can be placed in the free roaming area.
- Hang out with the rats during free roam; play, observe and enjoy extra time with them.

- **NEVER** allow dogs, cats, or other animals to interact directly with the rats when free roaming; it takes one moment of prey instincts kicking in for an accident to occur. While barn hunt rats do interact with dogs some through Barn Hunt, they are never in direct contact with dogs—it needs to stay that way.
 - If your rats are not litter box trained, they may pee in the free roam area; keep this in mind when choosing what things to add, if you want to lay something out, etc.
 - If your rats ARE litter box trained, make sure they have access to their litter box or have a litter box in the free roam area; sometimes just a travel cage will work to put the box in along with bedding.

Trick Training:

Yes, rats can learn tricks just like dogs! There are many rat trick training videos online as well as available books. Rat trick training is like dog training. Do not hesitate to talk to your local positive reinforcement dog trainer and get some tips on teaching tricks to your dog—and then apply it to your rats. Enjoy!

- Jump through a hoop or over a jump
- Raise a flag pole
- Spin
- Weave Poles
- Agility courses
- Basketball
- High fives

