

Health

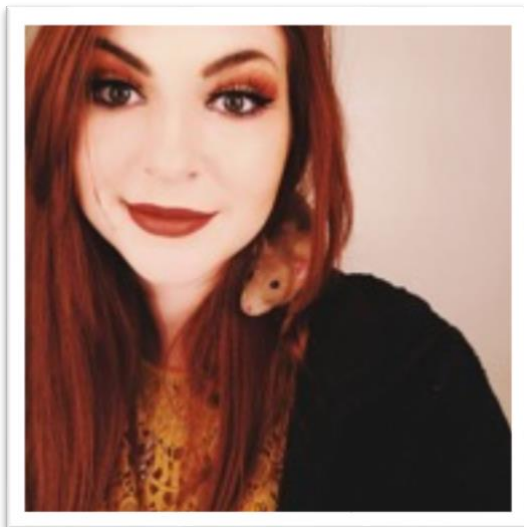
They're intelligent and friendly. Why some people think rats are the perfect pet, for fun and comfort.

By **Kim Mueller**

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When Abby Chronister started college six years ago, she found herself struggling with anxiety and depression. After class, she often retreated to her bed. That's when she adopted her first two rats, Luci and Lena.

“Those little critters are what made me get out of bed, knowing I had those little lives to care for,” the 25-year-old graphic designer from Mission, Kan., said. “They bond with you like a dog does. You might not have the energy to walk a dog, but you can manage to fill a water bottle.”



Chronister kept her rats in a cage tucked in the corner of her dorm room. They were quiet. They were clean. And her roommate loved them. Rats might not be everyone's idea of a perfect pet or a soothing companion for anxious times, but they have a following, albeit small.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Housing Survey, about [half of American households](#) have pets, primarily dogs or cats. About 4 percent of pet owners have small animals, according to an [online survey](#) of 10,000 current pet owners by the American Pet Products Association, a not-for-profit industry group. And of those animal owners, only 6 percent own a rat or mouse — well behind guinea pigs (27 percent), rabbits (27 percent) and hamsters (25 percent), but ahead of gerbils (4 percent) and hermit crabs (2 percent).

Most pet rodents — such as gerbils, hamsters and guinea pigs — tend to bite, said veterinarian Cory Bassett, who specializes in exotic pet care in Overland Park, Kan. They are more antisocial and skittish because they are bred for quantity, not personality, she said.

But rats specifically bred to be pets, she said, are calm — and do not tend to bite the hand that feeds them, she said, and seem to bond emotionally with cage mates and owners.

“Rats are a misunderstood pet,” Bassett said. “People think of them as vermin and pests. People who think they are a really gross pet just don’t realize what they have to offer. If you are looking for a rodent pet that you are going to have a personal connection with, I would recommend a rat.”

The rats sold at pet stores, used in laboratory experiments and adopted from private breeders are all [Norway rats](#). Despite their name, they originally come from China but now live everywhere — except Antarctica. Lab rats, which are not sold to the general public, come from a vendor’s restricted genetic stock and are kept in isolated cages where they do not socialize with humans. Lab rats are not intended to be pets.

“I actually have positive feelings towards rats, but I don’t want a rat as a pet,” said professor Peggy Mason, a neurobiologist at the University of Chicago, who uses [rats in her anxiety and empathy studies](#). “It’s professional courtesy. We have a good working relationship, me and the rats. It’s just not a pet relationship. Besides, my cats would do short order on the rats.”

The general public primarily buys pet rats at two places: retail stores and private breeders also called ratteries. Retail stores sell rats for \$10 to \$15 that are derogatorily referred to as feeder rats because they are bought as food for reptiles or birds. Randomly bred for quantity, these rats are seldom handled.

Private breeders often buy their first rats from retail stores then selectively breed them for several generations. Called Fancy rats, these creatures are bred to be friendly and curious companions. Their price can range from \$25 to \$100 each, depending on the length of its family tree. Rats selectively bred over several generations cost more than rats bred just once.

Rat lovers tend to agree that the critters have only one major flaw: They die too soon. “They only live two to three years,” Chronister said sadly, “which is one of the heartbreaking parts because they grab hold of you and they never let go.” Yet, the short life span is a major selling point for parents buying a first pet for younger children who can quickly lose interest in the new family member.

Domesticated rats, like most animals kept as pets, do carry diseases. In 2017, Norway rats from 31 ratteries infected 17 people in 11 states in the first known zoonotic (spread between animals and humans) [outbreak of Seoul virus](#) in the United States and Canada. Three people were hospitalized with the virus, which can cause

health problems from mild influenza-like illness to kidney failure and death, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Commonly found in wild rats, Seoul virus is spread through rat urine or droppings, or from virus particles inhaled from the rats' contaminated bedding. The CDC recommends that pregnant women, children age 5 or younger and people with weakened immune systems not own rats.

One infected rattery kept cages piled on top of one another against the kitchen wall near the food and dining table, CDC epidemiologist Trevor Shoemaker said.

"We recommended depopulation: kill all your rats and start over again, but they wouldn't," he said. "They were attached to them. They all had names." Infected colonies that weren't killed were put into quarantine, Shoemaker said, and owners were given instructions for proper sanitation and ventilation.

Domesticated rats also can transmit [leptospirosis](#), [salmonellosis](#) and [rat bite fever](#), according to the American Veterinary Medical Association. These diseases are considered rare, have [low mortality rates](#), and also can be carried by other animals including dogs, cats, mice, guinea pigs, gerbils, ferrets, weasels, squirrels, monkeys, livestock and wild animals. Prevention measures primarily include washing hands after handling animals, avoiding animals that bite and staying out of potentially contaminated water such as floods.

The American Fancy Rat & Mouse Association (AFRMA) recommends buying domesticated, socialized rats from breeders who can provide the animal's health history, exact age and parental temperament.

"Do your homework before getting a pet rat," AFRMA President Karen Robbins said. "Some people are allergic to the bedding or urine. On rare occasions, people are allergic to the rat itself. Research the pet before buying."

Fancy rats come in seven varieties based on coat, ear and tail types: Standard (short, glossy coat), Rex (curly hair and curly whiskers), Satin (thin, long coat), Bristle coat (stiff, coarse hair), Tailless (born without a tail, similar to Manx cats), Hairless (born without a coat) and Dumbo (ears on the side rather than on top), according to AFRMA. The Dumbo rat is the most popular variety today thanks to its namesake featured in the 2019 Disney movie, Robbins said.

"A well-bred rat will be kind of like a well-bred dog," said Chronister, who now breeds rats as a hobby and owns Dumbo rats. "They will be friendly. They will be curious. And they will cuddle."

Studies suggest rats [dream](#) when they sleep, giggle [when tickled](#) and [grind their teeth \(called bruxing\) with pleasure when stroked](#) — similar to when cats purr. Rats are also empathetic, according to a [study](#) in which lab rats rescued other trapped rats who previously helped them.

“Rats will help other rats, and that is pretty amazing,” said Mason, who conducted the study. “They were doing it because they not only recognized that another rat was in distress, but they actually felt that another rat was in distress.”

And the animals can be litter-box trained, just like cats, said Nina Hohimer, who with her two daughters raises 36 Fancy rats in Shawnee, Kan. She simply places rat poop and a smooth river rock into a litter box inside the cage. The critters quickly catch on. They climb into the box, defecate in the litter box and urinate on the pee rock to mark their territory.

Hohimer keeps her 36 rats in her basement bedroom, safely away from her two dogs. Nine cages equipped with hammocks and toys line the wall in the small room just feet from her bed where she enjoys falling asleep to the sounds of their scurrying feet, little squeaks — and occasional squabbles.

A domestic abuse survivor, Hohimer brought her first rat home after rescuing it from an abusive owner. “The rats have helped me and my girls cope with a lot of emotional and psychological healing, The boys snuggle under our chins when we have flashbacks, anxiety issues or when we are feeling particularly sad. They help a lot with rebuilding our confidence and with quieting our nerves.”

“Recovery from trauma is a long road,” she said, “and I would say that it is certainly easier with these little guys helping us.” Anakin, her favorite rat, crawled up her shoulder and hid behind her neck, occasionally peeking at the stranger in the room. Hohimer offered a treat to coax the critter to pose for a picture.

Like many rat owners, Hohimer has taught her pocket pets to come when called by name. Other owners have taught their rats to [fetch a ball](#), [run an obstacle course](#), [jump through hoops](#) — even pull on a cord to raise a little flag.

When not performing tricks, the larger males enjoy perching on their owners’ shoulders and snuggling against their necks. Chronister said male rats are more suitable pets for children because their large bodies are easier to hold compared with the smaller females who on average are about 30 percent lighter, and weigh about half a pound to one pound. Her biggest male rat weighed more than 1½ pounds. “He was a walrus,” she said laughing. Males also are less likely to run away, she said.

Bassett said hormones are to blame for the different behaviors. Female rats, hamsters, gerbils and guinea pigs all seem to be more independent and active while the males are more interactive with humans. And castrated rats are the friendliest, she said.

Because a female rat can produce litters of [six to 12 pups every three weeks](#), reputable breeders usually only sell these social animals in same-gender pairs. Bassett also encourages rat owners to neuter their pets, a procedure that can cost about \$300.

“I discourage people from breeding, especially rats,” Bassett said. “If you don’t know what you are doing, you are going to have a ton of rats in just a month’s time.”

Chloe LaPointe decided to skip the pricey procedure when she adopted two male rats in Bristol, Tenn., where she lives.

Then one day LaPointe discovered her boy rat was really a girl with an unusually large protrusion. Now she is caring for 24 rats. “I accidentally had a breeding situation,” LaPointe said. “I’m thinking of getting a bird for my next pet.”