

## Finding Your Perfect Cage

One frequently overlooked topic in rat care, yet one that is often misunderstood, concerns the appropriate enclosure for new rats. Many adopters believe they have addressed this question by purchasing a cage from their local pet store's small pet section, where cages designed for hamsters, birds, rabbits, ferrets, and even rats are available. However, these options may not always be suitable.

This page does not endorse any particular cage model, as in my assessment. Nevertheless, there are well-established guidelines to help individuals evaluate the many options when selecting an appropriate enclosure.

**\*Please read the entire article to be fully informed. There are links to cages that are pre-approved at the bottom of the article.**

### How Big is "Big Enough"?

The size of cage you need will be determined by the number of rats you have. These guidelines will be for the MINIMUM space needed to house your rats. The more space you give, the healthier and happier they will be. Even if your rats spend most of the daylight hours sleeping in a single spot and you wonder, "Why on earth do I need such a huge cage when they only use a few inches of it?!" There are a lot of reasons why space matters for health and wellness, which I will list throughout this article.

### CUBIC FEET

The cubic feet applies to the MINIMUM cubic feet of the cage as a whole. Cubic feet can be calculated by multiplying the length x width x height (in inches) and then dividing by 1,728 inches. This will give you the base cubic feet of your cage. For example, the standard Single Critter Nation (SCN) cage is 24"x36"x24", which makes it 12 cubic feet (cu ft).

- 6 cu ft is the minimum for a pair of rats (2 rats). Rats should not be housed alone, so this would be your minimum cage size for any group of rats, even just *ONE* if it needs to be housed alone. (This does not include quarantining for health, this is a living space for long-term housing).
- Add **2 cu ft** for **each** additional rat in your care beyond the first two. That means if you have three rats, they need 8 cu ft, four rats need 12 cu ft. This also means the SCN cage (referenced in the example) maxes out at 4 rats.

### INDIVIDUAL DIMENSIONS

The term "individual dimensions" denotes the minimum allowable length for any side of a cage. I attribute Length as the **longer** of the two sides of the base and width as the **shorter** of the two sides of the base. Height is easy since it is how tall the cage portion is, *not including any base or stand that may come with the cage*.

- WIDTH: The cage should be **equal to or greater than 18" wide**.
- LENGTH: The cage should be **equal to or greater than 24" long**.
- HEIGHT: The cage should be **equal to or greater than 24" tall**.

### SQUARE FEET OF FLOOR SPACE

I found that the more commonly popular (cheap) cages from certain pet stores were a huge recurring commonality when rats were experiencing issues with aggression, illness, or early death. Determining adequate floor space is essential for proper rat housing. The square footage refers specifically to the amount of flat, solid walking area available to the rats; this does not include surfaces comprised of bars, nor shelves, ledges, or ramps smaller than 12"x20". Cages that are overly narrow or winding can force rats into consistently curved postures, potentially causing spinal, tail, and joint complications as they age. Inadequate cage space may also limit nighttime activity, increasing the risk of obesity and associated internal organ strain, particularly on the heart. Providing a larger cage base ensures ample room for movement and natural nocturnal activity. While rats enjoy climbing, it is advisable to incorporate most climbing structures outside the cage and prioritize flat, stable walking surfaces inside to promote safety and suitability for rats of all ages and life stages.

### Is Taller Better?

Taller cages provide rats with greater options for temperature regulation; ascending within the enclosure allows access to warmer air, while remaining at lower levels offers cooler conditions. Thus, increased cage height can enhance rat comfort without necessitating frequent relocation of the enclosure due to seasonal or temporary weather changes.

Some owners may consider tall, narrow cages to maximize cubic footage without occupying significant floor or table space. However, such designs often limit mobility. Rats must frequently navigate numerous turns to reach upper levels, and climbing obstacles may abound. While younger rats typically manage these challenges with ease, aging rats often experience diminished leg strength, which increases the risk of falls. Falls from greater heights are inherently more dangerous than those from shorter distances.

Modifications are possible with tall cages that feature a larger base. For example, hammocks can be placed strategically to serve as soft landing areas. Rats with known mobility issues or reduced limb strength should be housed in enclosures no taller than 24 inches, featuring easily navigable ramps and ledges. Ideal ramps and ledges have gentle inclines and stable, solid surfaces to ensure secure footing.

In summary, increased cage height is advantageous only when paired with a sufficiently large base. A cage measuring 18"x18"x40" is suboptimal despite its height, as it restricts the rats' ability to run and engage in natural behaviors that require more lateral space.

### BAR SPACING: (Why Bar Types Matter)

- 1/2" (0.5"): This is the optimal bar spacing for rats.
- 1": This bar spacing is fine for most ADULT rats of standard size. It is too large for baby rats up to 6 months old. All rats grow at varying rates, so the actual age when you could use this type of cage varies. Dwarf rats can *NEVER* be housed in 1" bar spacing as they never get to a large enough size. In some cases and bar styles, this width may be too large because the bars are too easy to bend and squeeze out of. I never recommend a 1" bar space cage for rats, even if rats are adults.

If you have a 1" bar spaced cage, you can attach 1cm wire mesh (hardware cloth) to the outside of the cage to keep the baby rats in, then remove when they are large enough to not escape, if there is ever a time they get that big. Keep in mind that hardware cloth is not meant to last forever and does deteriorate over time. It can rust, break, and pose a serious health risk to rats if it remains on the cage for a prolonged time.

### Other Things to Consider

Some final points for consideration when you have narrowed your choices down based on other criteria:

- **Avoid plastic bases & wood cages or accessories** whenever possible. Rats like to chew and can slowly (or sometimes quickly) get chewed right through for rat escapes.
- **Ramps and shelves with solid construction are better** than those made with wire mesh or bars. If you find a cage and this is the only flaw, ramp and shelf covers can be used to make the surfaces softer for walking. If covering ramps and shelves, a solid surface should be used, such as a piece of hard plastic or cardboard to create a hard surface under a fabric cover, not just fabric over the wire. Fabric over wire alone is like walking on pebbly ground with just socks on - ouch! Even if you find a cage with solid ramps, I recommend covering them to prevent slips or falls. The solid construction is better on the feet, but plastic or metal can be slippery (this is also why I recommend a blanket if bonding in a bathtub.)

### What Cage Do YOU Recommend?

**These are the cages I know to fit all the requirements above:**

- Critter Nation Cage by Midwest: <https://amzn.to/3DNXAxT> This cage is good for adopters who want to potty train their rats and NOT have the entire bottom tray be full of litter. Liners or shelf covers are used with this cage, in most cases, to encourage rats to do their business in a designated litter box that is small and easy to clean. The CN cage is by far the sturdiest cage on the market. I've had some for 5 years with little to no wear, rust, or issues besides places where I've accidentally bent a bar while trying to wash them down. The huge doors make it really easy to spot clean and decorate the cages. The shelves are bigger than any other cage I've seen and have the ability to hang items from the bottom of them, too. I just really prefer this cage to all others for reliability and length of usable time.
- Want more rats or a bigger cage than the SCN above? Here is a link to the double critter nation cage (twice the space, for twice the rats!): <https://amzn.to/41VR3yr>
- Prevue Cage: <https://amzn.to/43SvBYo> This cage is good for adopters who do not feel confident about litter box training their rats. There is a pull-out tray for litter at the bottom (separated by a grate to keep them out of it). This cage is smaller and a little harder to decorate than the CN cage, but it works very well.