

# UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTION

Unfortunately, rats are quite susceptible to respiratory illness. Chances are, if you have rats, at some point you will encounter the illness. Most rats carry mycoplasma, which is the organism that most often leads to URI (upper respiratory infection) and pneumonia. Some rats can carry this without ever showing symptoms, while others will suffer from infections on and off throughout their lives, most often brought on by stress. MN Pocket Pet Rescue has put together some information on this illness, including its causes, symptoms, and tips that you can use to help prevent it.

## CAUSE

There are a few different organisms that can cause URIs but the most common is mycoplasma.

*“Mycoplasma pulmonis is a bacteria present in the nasal passages of rats. The only rats guaranteed to be free of the mycoplasma bacteria are laboratory rats kept in a perfectly sterile environment. For this reason, mycoplasma pulmonis is the most common cause of respiratory infections in rats. Although there are several other bacteria that can cause the same symptoms, the usual culprit is mycoplasma. When a rat gets old, or gets stressed, the mycoplasma bacteria has a chance to take hold and multiply. Pneumonia is when the infection gets into the lungs. With rats, a “cold” (i.e., sneezing and sniffing), can quickly lead to pneumonia which can cause permanent damage to the lungs and even death if left untreated.”*

- Rat & Mouse Club of America

## SYMPTOMS

It is really important to be aware of and watch for any symptoms of URIs and report them to your vet as soon as you notice. These little guys will try to hide illness for as long as they possibly can. By the time you notice any symptoms, they likely have been ill for a while and will need treatment as soon as possible.

- sneezing
- breathing harder/faster
- rattled breathing
- eye/nose discharge
- squinting
- lethargy
- disinterest in food/treats
- wheezing
- head tilt
- excessive ear/face rubbing
- chattering
- unkempt/dirty coat or tail
- reddish spatters around cage/bedding

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## TREATMENT

URIs and pneumonia are treated with antibiotics. Most of these medications are flavored and some rats will even get excited to take them. Your rat may be sent home with more than one antibiotic depending on the severity of the illness. Keep a close eye on the other rats living with the sick rat to watch for signs of illness so that they can be treated quickly if they develop symptoms. You should not separate the sick rat from its cagemates as this can stress all of them out. Here are some things you can do at home to help your rat feel better:

- Set up a humidifier next to the cage and/or bring them into the bathroom with you while you shower. The steam helps loosen mucus (just like when we have a cold). 10 - 15 minute intervals are generally best. Be sure to clean out the humidifier to prevent mold.
- Offer little bits of yogurt while the rat is on antibiotics to keep the gut normal.
- Change soiled bedding every day.
- Offer a heating pad or heat lamp area for them to go to. Use common sense with this to avoid chewing of cords, pads, or other items and burning/fire hazards. Be sure that there is a space for them to get away from the heated area if needed.
- Keep the cage away from drafts.
- If the rat is lethargic, make sure that food and water is nearby and on the same level as the rat so they don't have to exert themselves.

## PREVENTION

### *Cleaning*

Spot clean the cage in between cleanings if you are able and use only unscented bedding (no wood or bedding with added fragrance). Thoroughly clean the cage at least once a week, possibly more if you have more rats and/or a smaller cage. Wipe down everything and wash all washable items (hammocks, soft toys, igloos, etc.) Throw out any soiled, non-washable items such as cardboard, wood, or even chews.

### *Habitat*

Allow the rats as much space (as large of a cage) as possible. Be sure the cage is in a well-ventilated area. Never use aquariums or tub cages for rats. Avoid moving the cage and keep it away from excessive/loud noises or smells and out of direct sunlight.

### *Stress*

Minimize stress as much as possible. Keep a daily routine for them.

