



# Australian Rat Fanciers Society Inc.

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## DESEXING ADVICE

There are definite health benefits to desexing both male and female rats, and desexed rats of either gender are generally calmer and the longest-lived.

It is very important that the surgery is done by a vet who is experienced in rat surgery. Please see the Vet List page of the AusRFS website, the vets we recommend for desexing are marked. Rats generally recover very quickly after surgery, and post op care is usually straightforward.

**Females** The desexing surgery for females is a more complicated surgery than for males, but has enormous health benefits. A high percentage of undesexed females will develop rapidly growing mammary tumours. Although they are usually benign, they can grow huge, almost as big as the rat. Desexing the rat when it is young and healthy is much better than surgery to remove huge or multiple tumours when the rat is older. Pituitary tumours are also fairly common, and are always fatal. Desexing a female rat greatly reduces the risk of her developing mammary tumours or pituitary tumours. Females are infertile immediately after desexing.

**Males** Desexing males has health and temperament benefits. Desexed boys are usually calmer and more placid than entire boys. Their fur retains its 'baby rat' smell and softness. Desexed males don't produce buck-grease and are less likely to scent-mark.

Male rats can still father babies for up to 5 weeks after their surgery, so should not be in contact with entire females before then.

If a rat of either sex shows signs of aggression towards its cage mates or humans, then it definitely should be desexed. It takes around 8 weeks for the rat's hormones to drop to a level that reduces aggression. If a rat is aggressive to other rats, then separate living quarters will be necessary for 8 weeks before beginning slow introductions on neutral territory.

## DESEXING SURGERY - CARE ADVICE

### PRE-OP

Rats can't vomit and need continuous access to food, so they must not be fasted before surgery.

If the rat is experiencing respiratory issues or is not well, the vet will be unlikely to operate due to the risk with anaesthetic. Please contact the vet if in doubt.

### TAKING THE RAT TO THE VET

The rat will need to be taken to the vet in a comfortable, escape proof travel cage. The cage should contain:

**Food:** We recommend a little of their normal dry food plus a bowl of some wet food, such as savoury baby food, mashed vegetables or wet cereal. The wet food is easy to eat and helps keep the rat hydrated.

**Water:** Hydration is very important - make sure the water is placed low in the cage so it's easy for the rat to get to it after surgery.

**Warm Bedding:** Some soft fleece to keep the rat warm and comfortable. Warmth is vital after anaesthetic.

**Litter:** Litter trays take up too much room in most travel cages, so place litter straight onto the bottom of the cage, so it is easy for rats to toilet.

## **COLLECTING THE RAT FROM THE VET**

Some vet clinics will send rats home before they are fully awake after anaesthetic. Rats shouldn't be sent home while they are still groggy.

**On the way home:** Keep the rat quiet and warm – warmth is vital. It's a good idea to cover their cage with a towel so it's a little dark and to keep the warmth in.

**Environment:** Keep the rat in a quiet place, with not too much light and check them occasionally.

**Housing:** It's usually a good idea to keep the rats in their travel cage overnight, as it's easier to keep them warm and inactive in the smaller space. But if the rat is stressed in the travel cage, use your own judgment.

If the rat normally shares their cage with others who haven't had surgery that day, you might want to give them some supervised time with the other rats, so they don't get lonely, before putting them to bed.

**Warmth:** It is vital that the rat is kept warm overnight after their surgery. Unless it is a very hot day, use a Snugglesafe or wheatbag if you own them, a hot water bottle can also be used but these start off very hot and lose heat quickly.

A Snugglesafe can go inside or outside the cage. A bag or bottle up must be placed outside the cage, at the end away from where the rat will be sleeping. Make sure the rat can't reach it.

**Food & Water:** Make sure water is easy to access and continue to offer both normal dry food and wet food.

## **MEDICATIONS**

Your rat will be sent home with pain meds – usually enough for a couple of days.

Administering oral medications by syringe can be stressful for rats and owners. Mixing the medication with a small amount of tasty food is much easier. Add the medication to just enough food to mask the taste of the medicine - around 1/4 teaspoon maximum.

The most successful foods for hiding medications are: custard, yoghurt, chocolate mousse, Farex or Cerelac baby rice cereal powder mixed into a paste with soy milk, fruit puree, fish paste, liverwurst, paté, tasty cheese, mashed avocado, or a tiny piece of toast with butter and vegemite.

The mixture may then be fed using a spoon or small dish. Sometimes rats who are not feeling well will refuse to eat from the spoon or dish, but will lick the mixture off their owner's finger.

Whatever you choose to hide the medication in, a little play-acting on the part of the owner is helpful. The rat needs to think that what they are getting is a special treat, something they don't get much of, something they should eat up quickly before another rat gets it!

## **RECOVERY**

It's near impossible to keep a bandage on a rat, so your rat will be sent home with their wound uncovered. The area will be shaved. Vets use dissolvable sutures, so our rat won't need to go back to the vet unless there is an issue. Your vet might also use medi glue to close the wound and protect the wound.

Check the incision area a couple of times a day. Rats can pull their stitches a little if they are being very active or doing a lot of climbing too soon after their surgery. Very occasionally a rat (or a friend) will chew at sutures, but this is rare. Contact the vet if the rat opens its sutures or is bleeding.

The rat might be slightly subdued for a day or two after surgery, but they should not show signs of pain or major change in their appearance, behaviour or movement. Watch out for: fluffed up fur, hunched posture, walking oddly, sides sunken in, eyes squinting or closed, or abnormal breathing. If you are worried, contact the vet. Most vets won't charge, or have reduced fees for post-op revisits.

**Boys:** Desexing is not a huge procedure for boys, so they recover quickly. By the next morning they should be acting normally and be eager to get out of the travel cage and back to their normal routine. Their incision will be quite small, and it will heal quickly, so they can usually resume normal activity after about 4-5 days and after this time their wound will be barely noticeable.

**Girls:** Desexing is a more invasive operation for girls. They recover from their surgery quickly, but need a little more TLC as the larger incision takes longer to heal. We recommend reduced activity for at least a week as their wound will take around 7 – 10 days to heal.

**If you have questions or issues please don't hesitate to contact the AusRFS**