WALNUT CREEK SUPPLY

THE COMPLETE CARE GUIDE

Fancy Mouse

A mouse is not a starter rat — know the sex rule

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New owner? *Go straight to Section 1. It is written so you can set up a safe, correct home and get through the first 48 hours without reading anything else first.*

Fancy mice are everything a small pet promises to be — animated, curious, fast, and genuinely entertaining to watch — wrapped in a package that fits on a desktop and costs almost nothing to feed. A pair of does in a well-furnished enclosure does not sit still. They nest obsessively, rearrange their bedding with obvious purpose, investigate every tube and cardboard roll on a nightly schedule, and run distances that would tire a dog. They recognize their keeper's scent within a week of arrival. For families with children, for apartment dwellers, for first-time pet owners, the appeal is immediate and real.

The honest conversation, though, needs to happen before setup begins. Fancy mice live **1.5 to 3 years**. That is not a rough estimate — it is the actual lifespan for this species, and it belongs in the first paragraph of every care guide because it is the piece of information most consistently underweighted by a new keeper. Short lifespans mean vet care, and emotional investment, and loss, all compressed into a timeline that surprises people who have owned cats or dogs. It also means that health changes demand prompt attention: a mouse who has gone off food for three days has lost a meaningful chunk of her weekly window. Act quickly with mice. Their margin is narrower than almost any other common pet.

The second conversation is about housing. **Bucks** (male mice) and **does** (female mice) have completely different social requirements — so different that getting this wrong before setup leads to real harm. Does are social and should be kept in groups of two to four. Bucks are territorial and will fight to serious injury or death when housed with unrelated males. This is not a risk to manage carefully — it is a certainty to avoid by housing correctly from the start. These rules are covered in detail in the Meet Your Fancy Mouse section and need to be understood before any animal is purchased.

Get those conversations out of the way, and what remains is a straightforward, high-reward small pet — one whose activity, personality, and social dynamics reward a keeper who sets up the space correctly and engages with them daily.

SECTION 1

Quick Start: Your First 48 Hours

1. **Build the complete enclosure before any mouse arrives.** A glass aquarium with a secure screen lid is the recommended starting point — minimum **10 gallons** for one or two mice. Have substrate, nesting material, water, food, wheel, and hides all in place before the mice enter. A mouse placed in an unfurnished or half-finished enclosure is a stressed mouse, and the first 48 hours set the tone for how quickly they settle.

2. **Decide on sex and group composition before purchase, not after.** This is the single decision that affects every housing and purchasing choice downstream. Two or more does together: excellent. A single doe alone: not recommended — does are social and single-housed does show higher rates of **stereotypic behavior** (repetitive, purposeless movement caused by a barren environment, defined in Common Challenges). A single buck alone: fine and usually appropriate unless he was raised in a bonded littermate pair. Two unrelated adult bucks together: never.

3. **Set substrate depth to at least 3 inches.** Mice are burrowers. A substrate layer deep enough to support tunneling is not an aesthetic choice — it is a behavioral need. Pour paper-based bedding to 3–4 inches. Tamp it lightly in one corner so mice have a firm zone to burrow into; leave the rest loose.

4. **Add nesting material before the mice go in.** A generous handful of paper towel strips, unbleached tissue, or commercial nesting paper (confirmed not to be fiber-wool style that can tangle limbs) placed in one corner. Mice will move it where they want it within hours. The nesting drive is one of the strongest in the species and a mouse without ample nesting material is a mouse under chronic low-grade stress.

5. **Install the wheel before the first mouse enters.** A **solid-surface wheel** — not wire or mesh — at **6.5 to 8 inches in diameter**. Mice run 5 to 8 miles per night. A wheel is not optional enrichment; it is a physiological necessity. Wire wheels cause foot and tail injuries. Any wheel smaller than 6.5 inches forces the mouse to run with an arched back, causing long-term

spinal strain. Place the wheel away from the nesting corner to reduce sleep disruption for cage mates.

6. **Fill the sipper bottle and verify it is working before the mice arrive.** Attach a **sipper bottle** to the enclosure wall. Mice tip open water dishes while burrowing — a bowl is not a reliable water source in a mouse enclosure. Check that water flows from the spout by pressing the ball tip. Refresh daily.
7. **Add at least one hide and two or three enrichment items.** A small wooden house or half-log hide gives the group a communal shelter. At minimum: one hide, one cardboard tube, one gnaw block. More is always better — a mouse with nothing to investigate is a mouse that develops stereotypy.
8. **Place mice in the enclosure and leave them alone for 48–72 hours.** Check water and food level quietly once a day. No handling, no rearranging, no extra peeking. They need to locate the food, claim nesting territory, map the wheel, and establish that the enclosure is safe. Does in a new group will spend the first night establishing social rank — brief chasing and posturing is normal. Persistent biting, squealing, and active wounding is not.
9. **Start gentle, brief daily interaction beginning on day three.** Offer a small piece of food — a sunflower seed, a tiny piece of leafy green — from an open palm placed flat on the enclosure floor. Let them come to you. Do not attempt to pick up mice who are still in their acclimation window. Taming moves at mouse speed, not owner speed.
10. **Find an exotic small mammal vet before you need one.** Not every vet who sees small animals has experience with mice specifically. Call ahead and confirm before you are in a waiting room with a sick mouse. A respiratory infection in a mouse moves fast. Having a clinic you have already vetted means hours saved when it matters.

First-Time Starter Bundle

What needs to be in the house on day one and what to look for in each category.

Essentials

- **A glass aquarium with a secure screen lid** — 10-gallon minimum for one or two mice; a 20-gallon long is the recommended upgrade for a group of three or four does and provides meaningfully more space for burrowing, the wheel, and enrichment. Screen lids must clip or latch shut — a lid that simply rests under its own weight will be pushed off by a mouse who has tested the perimeter. Wire cages marketed for hamsters or gerbils can work only if bar spacing is under ¼ inch; most wire cages on the market have gaps large enough for a mouse to squeeze through or, at minimum, get a head wedged in.
- **Paper-based bedding at depth** — Carefresh, Boxo, or a comparable unscented paper-based substrate at 3–4 inches minimum. Paper-based substrates are the current best practice for mice: no aromatic phenols, appropriate dust level for a small respiratory tract, and strong absorbency for urine. Purchase enough to fill the enclosure to depth — a thin layer defeats the purpose entirely.
- **Nesting material** — unbleached tissue paper, paper towel strips, or commercial soft nesting paper. Avoid loose fiber "fluff" nesting products that can wrap around tiny limbs and restrict circulation. Provide a generous amount: mice cache what they do not immediately use, and the ability to build a fully enclosed nest is a welfare outcome, not a decoration.
- **A solid-surface running wheel** — 6.5 to 8 inches in diameter. Plastic solid-surface wheels (Wodent Wheel, Niteangel, and comparable products) with silent bearings are the standard. Solid surface and correct diameter are the non-negotiable specifications. A noisy wire wheel is an inferior product on two counts: the open surface catches feet, and the sound disrupts overnight rest for everyone within earshot.
- **A sipper bottle** — standard small-animal bottle, clipped to the enclosure wall or screen lid frame. If you are housing three or four does, consider a second bottle: competition for a single bottle in a thirsty group leads to one or two individuals dominating access.
- **Wooden gnaw blocks or willow sticks** — mice's teeth grow continuously; appropriate chew materials are preventive dentistry. Untreated wood pieces (apple, willow, aspen), wooden craft sticks, or commercial small-animal chew blocks all

work. Avoid anything chemically treated, aromatic, or painted.

- **A small ceramic food dish** — heavy enough that mice cannot tip it while burrowing, or use scatter feeding directly on the substrate as a foraging alternative.

> ***Ready to set up?*** *Browse the essentials in our collections: Critter Enclosures and Critter Bedding and Accessories.*

Enrichment

- **Cardboard tubes and boxes** — toilet paper rolls, paper towel rolls cut in half, small cardboard boxes from household packaging. Free, replaceable, universally enjoyed. Mice investigate every tube, shred every box, and redistribute everything nightly. Replace every few days when soiled.
- **A wooden hide or cork half-log** — a communal sleeping area the group adopts as a home base. Unfinished wood, cork, and unglazed ceramic are appropriate materials; painted, varnished, or chemically treated wood is not.
- **Climbing items** — a small wooden ladder, stacked cork pieces, or rope ring. Mice are agile climbers who use vertical space readily when it is offered.
- **Scatter feeding and foraging opportunities** — hide small amounts of food in different areas of the substrate; tuck a seed under the bedding; place a small piece of dried herb under a tube. Foraging replicates wild feeding behavior and provides cognitive enrichment with zero cost.
- **A rotation schedule** — mice habituate to their environment quickly. Rotating one or two enrichment items per week — swapping a tube for a new shape, introducing a branch, adding a paper bag with a food item inside — maintains novelty and reduces stereotypy risk.
- **A travel carrier or small ventilated container** — introduce it to the enclosure now, weeks before a vet trip. Mice who have already explored a carrier as part of their normal environment enter it without distress.

> ***Enrichment, one click away.*** *Shop Critter Toys and Accessories.*

SECTION 2

Meet Your Fancy Mouse

The domestic fancy mouse is *Mus musculus* — the same species as the wild house mouse — selectively bred for docility, color variety, and temperament over more than **2,000 years**. The earliest recorded mouse keeping for pleasure and exhibition is documented in ancient China and Japan, where dedicated mouseries maintained structured breeding operations as early as 1100 BCE, producing many of the coat and color types still seen today: albinos, piebald patterns, and early work with long-eared and rex coats. The hobby moved to Europe in the 1800s, where the National Mouse Club in England was founded in 1895 — the first formalized mouse fancy club in the world — and selective breeding for exhibition-standard animals was codified. American mouse fancy developed in parallel through the twentieth century.

The result of that 2,000-year breeding history is an animal that is genuinely domesticated — not simply wild-caught and habituated, but a species shaped by generations of selection for tolerance of handling and proximity to humans. A well-socialized fancy mouse is meaningfully different from a wild house mouse in temperament, though the biology remains identical and the husbandry requirements do not change.

Trait	Detail
Common name	Fancy mouse, house mouse, pet mouse
Scientific name	*Mus musculus*
Origin	Domesticated from the house mouse; breeding history 2,000+ years; originated in China and Japan
Adult body length	3–4 inches (not including the tail, which typically equals body length)
Adult weight	1–2 oz (20–40 g); bucks often at the higher end of the range
Typical lifespan	**1.5–3 years** with good care; occasional individuals reach 3.5 years
Activity pattern	**Nocturnal** — most active after dusk; daytime disturbance causes chronic stress
Social structure	**Sex-dependent** — does: social, 2–4 per enclosure; bucks: typically solitary unless bonded littermates
Odor level	Moderate (does) to noticeable (bucks) — bucks produce a stronger musky urine smell; cleaning frequency and enclosure placement are the primary management tools
Temperament	Fast, curious, and agile; tames well with consistent daily handling from a young age

Sex-based social rules — the most important thing to know

This section is worth reading carefully before any purchase is made, because it is the one area where well-meaning advice online is inconsistently reliable and where getting it wrong before setup leads directly to harm.

Does are social animals. A single doe kept alone is not thriving — she shows higher rates of stereotypic behavior, stress-associated over-grooming, and lower overall activity than does housed in compatible groups. The recommended group size is **two to four does**. Introductions are usually smooth when mice are young (under 8 weeks) and when all enclosure members are new to the space simultaneously. Introducing an adult doe to an established group requires a longer neutral-territory introduction process, but it is achievable with patience. Does in a stable group squabble occasionally — brief chasing, minor **barbering** (fur-plucking along the face and head, a low-grade dominance behavior) — and that level of interaction is normal within a compatible group.

Bucks present a completely different situation. Unrelated adult males are territorial and fights escalate. Unlike the brief scuffles between does, buck confrontations can be relentless, injury-causing, and lethal — fights produce deep bite wounds on the back, rump, and tail base, and they continue until one animal is seriously injured or dead. Bucks that appear to coexist peacefully in a pet store or breeding facility are almost always living in a large, multi-exit environment with an established hierarchy maintained by the space available. Remove that space in a home enclosure and the same animals can fight to serious injury within days. The safe rule is one buck per enclosure. The two exceptions are **littermate bucks** raised together from birth and never separated — who can sometimes maintain a lifelong bond, though even these pairs occasionally need to be separated as testosterone rises at 8–12 weeks — and **castrated bucks**, who can often be introduced to a doe group successfully. Do not attempt to house unrelated adult males together. It is not a risk worth taking.

Coat and variety types

Selective breeding has produced a wide range of coat textures and physical variations. All carry identical husbandry requirements.

Standard coat: Short, smooth, and close-lying. The most common coat type in pet-store mice. No grooming requirements beyond normal self-maintenance.

Satin coat: A genetic modifier that produces a high-gloss, almost wet-looking sheen. Softer in texture than standard. Otherwise identical in care.

Rex coat: A curly-coated variety produced by a recessive gene affecting hair shaft structure. Rex mice have wavy or loosely curled coats, characteristically curled whiskers, and sometimes slightly reduced coat density. The curled whiskers are the most immediately recognizable feature.

Long-eared (informally "dumbo"): A variety in which the ears sit lower on the skull and are proportionally larger and more rounded than in standard-eared mice. Purely cosmetic; no functional implications for care or health.

Odd-eyed: One blue or unpigmented "wall" eye paired with a standard dark eye, a result of pigmentation genetics. Vision is typically normal.

Color varieties cover the full spectrum — agouti (the natural ticked brown-gray of the wild type), black, white, cream, fawn, chocolate, blue, lilac, silver, cinnamon — and dozens of marked patterns including pied (patched white with color), banded, and roan.

What surprises new owners

The speed. Mice move faster than new owners expect — faster than rats, faster than hamsters, significantly faster than most animals of comparable size. A mouse who has not yet bonded with her keeper will run from an approaching hand at a pace that surprises adults and genuinely startles children. New owners who try to catch a mouse rather than letting her come to them discover quickly that catching is not the method, and the chase sets taming back by days. Patience and the low-palm approach are the only technique that produces a handleable mouse. The handling section covers this in full.

The odor, specifically from bucks. Does produce a mild background smell that is manageable with regular cleaning and reasonable enclosure placement. Bucks produce a noticeably stronger musky urine odor that is, honestly, less pleasant to live with than many new owners anticipate. If you share a bedroom with the enclosure, or if anyone in the household is sensitive to animal smell, does are strongly recommended. Bedrooms are not ideal enclosure placement for any mice; a living room, study, or spare room positions the enclosure in a larger-air-volume space where regular cleaning keeps ammonia from accumulating.

The nesting compulsion. Mice do not treat nesting material as a static feature of their enclosure — they treat it as an active, ongoing project. They carry, redistribute, shred, pack, and rebuild their nest constantly. New owners who tidy the nest or straighten the materials often return the next morning to find it has been completely rebuilt according to mouse specifications. This is normal, healthy behavior. Providing enough nesting material for them to do this fully is one of the most important welfare contributions a keeper makes.

The lifespan, in practice. Some owners, particularly those coming from longer-lived small mammals, are genuinely unprepared for how compressed the timeline is. Health declines can move from subtle to serious in days. Tumors, respiratory infections, and neurological events often progress over a week or two rather than months. The short lifespan means prompt veterinary attention is not an overreaction — it is the appropriate standard of care for an animal whose entire remaining window may be months.

SECTION 3

Enclosure Setup & Layout

Tank vs. wire cage: why glass wins for mice

The instinct of many first-time mouse keepers is to purchase a wire cage — marketed as "small animal" housing, visually ventilated, inexpensive. For mice specifically, most wire cages sold in pet stores are not appropriate housing, and the reasons are concrete.

Bar spacing is the primary issue. A mouse can squeeze through any gap wider than approximately ¼ inch. Most wire cages designed for hamsters, gerbils, or small rats have bar spacing wider than that. A gap that looks small to a human hand is not small to a mouse with a flexible spine and no clavicle bones to limit shoulder width. A cage with improper bar spacing is a cage that produces a loose mouse — not sometimes, not occasionally, but eventually and with certainty once the mouse bothers to investigate the perimeter systematically.

Substrate depth is the second issue. The 3–4 inches of bedding mice need for burrowing cannot be maintained in a typical wire cage with a shallow plastic floor tray. The mouse kicks material out through the bars, reducing depth continuously and spreading bedding outside the cage. A glass aquarium contains substrate completely, allows full burrowing depth, and keeps the surrounding area clean.

Ventilation is where glass aquariums require attention. A glass tank with no screen lid, or with a partially blocked screen lid, accumulates ammonia from urine rapidly — at sub-threshold levels that are not obvious to a human nose but that damage mouse respiratory tissue with prolonged exposure. The solution is a **secure, well-ventilated screen lid** that clips to the tank rim. This provides the gas exchange a glass enclosure needs while containing the mouse and supporting substrate depth. Clean regularly: the ventilation benefit of a screen lid is negated if urine-saturated bedding is allowed to accumulate.

Sizing and layout

The minimum for one or two mice is a **10-gallon aquarium** (20" × 10" × 12"). This is a genuine minimum for a mouse with a running wheel and nesting area — it is not a comfortable long-term setup for a larger group. A **20-gallon long aquarium** (30" × 12" × 12") is the practical recommendation for a group of two to four does and provides meaningfully more enrichment space. The "long" footprint is preferred over "tall" for mice — floor space serves them better than vertical height, though mice do climb and will make use of moderate height when appropriate structures are provided.

Layout inside the enclosure:

- **Nesting zone:** one corner with extra nesting material depth; the hide placed here as the group's home base
- **Wheel:** positioned away from the nesting corner and close to an enclosure wall so it does not tip during vigorous nightly use
- **Feeding station:** a stable ceramic food dish, or a scatter-feeding zone across the general substrate; place away from the nesting corner to reduce fouling near food
- **Water source:** sipper bottle attached to the screen lid frame or to a clip mount on the tank wall; never a bowl
- **Enrichment zone:** tubes, climbing items, and gnaw materials distributed through the remaining floor space

Lid security

Mice are expert escape artists. A glass aquarium lid that rests under its own weight with no additional securing is a lid that a determined mouse will eventually push off. Screen lids for standard aquarium sizes are available with integrated rim clips — use them. A weight placed on top of an unclipped lid is not a reliable solution; it can shift, and a mouse who locates a workable gap through systematic nightly investigation will be loose by morning. Check the lid every single time the enclosure is opened — after

feeding, after cleaning, after any time a child has had the lid off.

SECTION 4

Substrate Guide

Substrate selection for mice focuses on dust level (mice have sensitive respiratory tracts), absorbency (urine volume relative to body size is high), burrowing suitability, and the absence of aromatic compounds that cause respiratory irritation or organ damage.

Substrate	Best for	Performance	Notes
Paper-based bedding (Carefresh, Boxo, similar)	All mice; preferred for all setups	Excellent absorbency; very low dust; no aromatic phenols; strong odor control when clean	The current best-practice substrate for mice; soft and packable for burrowing; available in unbleached versions; slightly more expensive than wood-based alternatives but the health margin is worth it
Aspen shavings (kiln-dried)	Adults; budget-conscious setups	Good absorbency; low aromatic content; mice burrow in it readily	A long-accepted small mammal substrate; must be kiln-dried to minimize mold risk; avoid fine-dust grades; slightly less effective than paper-based for odor control
Hemp bedding	Adults; naturalistic setups	Excellent absorbency; low dust; neutral scent	A newer option with strong performance; often blended with paper-based bedding for optimal results; firm enough to support burrowing tunnels
Paper towel strips (supplemental nesting layer)	All mice; layered on top of primary substrate	Not a standalone substrate; adds critical nesting texture	Place strips directly in the nesting zone; mice incorporate them into the nest structure immediately
Timothy or orchard grass hay (supplemental foraging layer)	Foraging enrichment	Absorbs some moisture; mice enjoy burrowing through it	A thin layer on top of primary substrate as a foraging base; not a primary substrate replacement
Cedar shavings	**Never, for any small mammal**	—	Aromatic phenols toxic via respiratory exposure; associated with liver damage with prolonged use; no safe use case at any concentration for mice
Pine shavings (standard, not kiln-dried)	**Never**	—	Same phenol concern as cedar; kiln-dried pine specifically processed for small animals is a different product — confirm the specification in writing before use
Clay cat litter (clumping or non-clumping)	**Never**	—	Clumping clay expands when wet; ingestion risk is significant for small mammals who groom their feet; no appropriate use in a rodent enclosure at any life stage
Scented bedding	**Avoid**	—	Fragrance compounds add unnecessary aromatic load to an enclosure with limited air volume; respiratory irritation risk in a mouse's small, sensitive airways

Practical note: paper-based bedding at 3–4 inches depth is the cleanest, safest, and most effective starting point. Spot-clean soiled areas every 2–3 days and do a full substrate change every 7–10 days for a 10-gallon enclosure. A 20-gallon with a small group of does can often go 10–14 days between full changes with consistent spot-cleaning. Smell is the actual signal — mouse

urine odor detectable from three feet away means cleaning was due yesterday.

SECTION 5

Temperature & Ventilation — The 2 Factors

Most of a corn snake's husbandry complexity lives in heating and humidity. For mice, the equivalent critical variables are **temperature** and **ventilation** — both worth getting right early, because mice's small respiratory systems are genuinely vulnerable to both extremes and to ammonia accumulation from inadequate airflow.

The good news is that mice are comfortable in the same temperature range that most people maintain indoors. No supplemental heating is required in most American homes. The risk runs in both directions: **heat above 80°F causes real physiological harm**, and cold drafts below 60°F are equally dangerous. A windowsill location that is comfortable in October can become dangerously hot in July afternoon sun or uncomfortably cold in a winter draft. Choose a location that is **stable year-round** before placing any enclosure.

Parameter	Target	How to measure	What goes wrong when it's off
Ambient enclosure temperature	**65–75°F**	Digital thermometer inside the enclosure — not the room thermostat, which measures air at a different height and location	Below 60°F: hypothermia, immune suppression, huddling, reduced activity; above 80°F: heat stress, labored breathing, prostration; mice cannot sweat and cool themselves poorly above 80°F
Maximum tolerable temperature	80°F (hard ceiling)	Thermometer; check in summer months and near south-facing windows	Above 80°F: heat exhaustion, seizures, rapid death; mice are more heat-sensitive than most other common small pets and have essentially no physiological buffer above this threshold
Draft exposure	None	Note air movement from nearby HVAC vents, fans, or exterior walls	Chronic drafts cause respiratory infections even at comfortable temperatures; position enclosures away from HVAC supply vents and exterior walls in cold climates
Enclosure humidity	Under 55%	Digital hygrometer inside the enclosure	Above 55% with inadequate ventilation: ammonia accumulates faster; condensation on enclosure walls indicates a ventilation problem
Ventilation quality	Continuous passive airflow through an unobstructed screen lid	Inspect the screen lid — no substrate kicked onto the mesh, no towel draped over it	Ammonia from urine damages respiratory tissue at concentrations the human nose cannot reliably detect; a clean, unobstructed screen lid on a regularly cleaned enclosure provides adequate exchange

Placement rules: never place a mouse enclosure in direct sunlight — even a brief afternoon sun patch can bring a glass tank above 80°F in minutes. Never position the enclosure above or immediately adjacent to an HVAC supply vent. Avoid exterior walls in northern climates in winter, where wall surface temperature and draft exposure are highest. A stable interior room or interior wall location that sees consistent year-round temperature is the correct choice.

SECTION 6

Diet & Nutrition

The lab block: why it is the foundation

The correct dietary foundation for mice is a **commercial lab block** — also called a complete pelleted rodent diet, laboratory rodent chow, or a pellet diet. Lab blocks are formulated to provide complete, balanced nutrition as a sole diet: appropriate ratios of protein, fat, carbohydrate, vitamins, and minerals for the rodent metabolic system. Well-regarded brands include Mazuri Rodent Diet, Oxbow Essentials Mouse Food, and Science Selective Mouse. Availability varies by US region, but at least one is accessible locally or online in most markets.

An important and frequently overlooked point: mice do well on **rat lab blocks** as well as mouse-specific formulations. The nutritional difference is minor, and a rat block is not too large for mice to hold in their paws or bite into. What matters is that the primary diet is a **complete pelleted product**, not a seed mix.

The seed mix problem

Colorful mixed seed and grain products make up the majority of "mouse food" sold in pet stores. They are not appropriate as the primary diet, and the reason is **selective eating**. Mice given a mixed food pick their preferred components — almost always the highest-fat seeds, including sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, and millet — and leave behind the nutritionally complete elements. The result, over weeks, is a mouse who appears well-fed but is receiving a diet high in fat and deficient in protein, vitamins, and calcium. This pattern produces obesity, deficiencies, and shortened lifespan without any obvious single-event cause — it is insidious precisely because the mouse always looks like she has food.

If you currently have a mouse on a seed mix and want to transition to a lab block: introduce the lab block alongside the current diet and gradually reduce the seed mix over 7–10 days. Most mice accept the transition readily once they are hungry enough to try the block.

Seed mixes are not without value. Small pinches make excellent **enrichment supplements** when scattered across the substrate as a foraging exercise — they provide behavioral enrichment and dietary variety without displacing the nutritional foundation of the lab block.

Fresh food supplementation

Mice evolved foraging across 20 or more food types per day in the wild. Variety in the diet is ecologically appropriate, and small amounts of fresh food offered several times per week provide nutritional breadth and behavioral enrichment simultaneously.

Fresh food	Appropriate?	Amount	Notes
Dark leafy greens (kale, spinach, romaine, arugula)	Yes	Small pinch, 2–3 times per week	Excellent vitamin source; remove uneaten portions within a few hours
Cooked plain egg (white and yolk)	Yes	A pea-sized piece, once per week	Good protein supplementation; no seasoning, oil, butter, or additives
Cooked plain chicken or turkey (no skin, unseasoned)	Yes	A pea-sized piece, occasionally	Lean protein useful for pregnant or nursing does

Fresh food	Appropriate?	Amount	Notes
Whole grains and small seeds as foraging (oats, pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds)	Yes, in small amounts	A pinch per session, not daily	Scatter for foraging enrichment rather than bowl-feed; high fat content means restraint
Fresh herbs (parsley, cilantro, dill, basil)	Yes	A few leaves	Enjoyed and well tolerated; adds variety and scent enrichment
Apple or pear (seeds removed)	Yes	A thin sliver, occasionally	Remove uneaten pieces within a few hours to prevent fermentation
Broccoli, carrot (small pieces)	Yes	A small piece	Good variety; accepted by most mice
Onions, garlic, leeks, and chives	**Never**	—	Toxic to mice; hemolytic anemia risk
Grapes and raisins	**Never**	—	Kidney toxicity; no safe dose
Citrus peel and pith	**Never for bucks; avoid for does**	—	Contains d-limonene; causes kidney damage specifically in male mice; bucks are particularly vulnerable
Raw dried beans and legumes (kidney beans, lentils raw)	**Never raw**	—	Contain lectins and anti-nutritional factors destroyed by heat; plain cooked is fine in small amounts
Chocolate	**Never**	—	Theobromine toxicity
Peanut butter (direct application)	**Avoid**	—	Aspiration risk — the thick, sticky consistency can cause choking in a small airway; a very thin scraping on a hard surface reduces but does not eliminate this risk
Processed human food, sweets, candy	**Never**	—	No appropriate use case

Coprophagy: why your mouse eats her own droppings

New owners frequently notice their mouse eating small, distinct droppings directly from her hindquarters and assume something is wrong. Nothing is wrong. **Coprophagy** — the consumption of one's own feces — is a normal and nutritionally important behavior for mice. **Cecal droppings**, a distinct soft type produced by the hindgut fermentation process, contain B vitamins, beneficial gut bacteria, and partially digested nutrients that are reabsorbed on the second pass. This is the same digestive strategy used by rabbits, guinea pigs, and hares. Do not attempt to prevent or discourage it — it is part of the mouse's normal digestive cycle.

Teeth and malocclusion prevention

Mice's front teeth — **incisors** — grow continuously throughout life and must be worn down through gnawing to stay at a functional length. When the upper and lower incisors are correctly aligned, normal eating and gnawing on cage materials maintain them naturally. **Malocclusion** — a misalignment of the incisors that prevents them from meeting and wearing correctly — allows one or both teeth to grow beyond functional length, eventually curving into the opposite gum surface and making eating painful or impossible. Signs of dental problems include: weight loss despite food being available, drooling or wet fur on the chin, difficulty picking up food, and progressively reduced eating.

Providing appropriate hard chew items — wooden gnaw blocks, untreated apple branches, willow sticks, wooden craft sticks — supports normal incisor wear and gives you a behavioral indicator of dental health: a mouse who has stopped gnawing her chew items has stopped doing something mice almost universally do, and that change is worth noticing.

Water

Always provide water via a **sipper bottle** attached to the enclosure wall. Open water dishes are tipped during burrowing, fouled with substrate, and occasionally become a drowning risk for very small or young mice. A sipper bottle ensures clean water is consistently available. Check the spout daily — the metal ball can get stuck in either the open or closed position. Refresh water every day; clean the bottle with a bottle brush every week.

> ***Shop the food and supplies:*** *Browse Critter Food Treats & Feed.*

SECTION 7

Enrichment & Nesting

Nesting material is a welfare essential: torn paper, cardboard tubes, wooden chews and hay.

Why nesting is a welfare essential, not a decoration

Of all the behavioral needs mice have, the nesting drive is the most fundamental and the most consistently underserved in typical pet-store setups. Mice in the wild spend a substantial portion of their active hours constructing, maintaining, and retreating into enclosed nests — not because shelter happens to be available, but because nest-building is a behaviorally motivated drive in the same category as eating and running. A mouse given no nesting material, or only a token handful, does not simply rest without a nest. Research has documented that such mice show chronically elevated stress hormones, reduced immune function, and higher rates of stereotypy. In severe and long-standing cases, the behavioral pattern becomes partially fixed and does not fully resolve even when the environment is later improved — which is why getting this right from the start matters.

What good nesting provision looks like: a generous supply of soft, shreddable material — paper towel strips, unbleached tissue, commercial soft nesting paper — in amounts that seem almost excessive from a human perspective. Mice cache far more than they use at any one time, and the ability to build a fully enclosed nest with a tunnel entrance and a warm interior chamber is the behavioral outcome you are supporting. A finished mouse nest looks like a small compressed ball of material with a hidden entrance hole. That is exactly right, and it represents genuine behavioral expression.

The wheel: not optional

A solid-surface wheel at 6.5 to 8 inches in diameter is a **welfare requirement**. Mice run 5 to 8 miles per night under normal activity conditions — a distance that, scaled to the mouse's body size, represents a level of locomotor activity that their physiology is built around. A mouse kept without a wheel does not simply rest more; she has no outlet for a core physical drive and develops stereotypy, obesity, and typically a shortened lifespan as a result.

Specifications matter:

- **Solid surface, no wire or mesh:** open wire wheels catch toes and tails. Over time they cause toe injuries, tail kinks, and occasionally degloving injuries. There is no version of a wire wheel that is safe for mice. Do not compromise on this.
- **6.5 to 8 inch diameter minimum:** a wheel smaller than 6.5 inches forces the mouse to run with an arched spine. This is not a minor ergonomic issue — it causes chronic spinal strain over months of nightly use. At 6.5–8 inches, most mice run with a flat or very slightly upward-curving back, which is the correct running posture.
- **Silent bearing:** a squeaking wheel running for 5–8 hours most nights is a quality-of-life issue for nearby humans and contributes to sleep fragmentation for cage mates. Silent-bearing wheels are the current standard; there is no reason to use a wheel with a noisy bearing when silent options are widely and inexpensively available.

DIY enrichment: the free-supplies approach

Commercial enrichment products for mice are available and often well-designed, but the most effective enrichment is frequently the simplest and least expensive. Mice do not distinguish between a $25 wooden enrichment toy and a toilet paper roll — both represent something to investigate, enter, shred, and redistribute. A restocked inventory of cardboard tubes every week provides continuous novelty at essentially no cost. The key quality of effective enrichment for mice is **novelty and variety**: the same tube in the same corner for three months is furniture, not enrichment; a new tube configuration every few days is an active environment.

Free or near-free enrichment that works:

- Toilet paper and paper towel rolls (whole or cut in half; mice can carry whole rolls, which is entertaining to watch)
- Small cardboard boxes from household packaging — shoe boxes, cracker boxes, small shipping containers; remove tape and staples before placing in the enclosure
- Egg carton cups placed singly or in sections
- Paper bags folded loosely with a small food item tucked inside
- Untreated wooden craft sticks or skewers for gnawing
- Small unglazed ceramic flower pots as alternate hides
- Dried herbs (thyme, lavender, chamomile) scattered in substrate for scent enrichment

Foraging and scatter feeding

Mice in the wild spend much of their active time searching for distributed, unpredictable food sources rather than eating from a single consistent pile. Replicating this in the home enclosure is straightforward: instead of always placing lab blocks in a food dish, scatter a few across the substrate, hide one under a cardboard tube, or place a small piece inside a loosely folded paper square. This approach converts feeding time into behavioral activity and is one of the highest-value, lowest-cost enrichment interventions a keeper can provide. A mouse who "forages" for her food is a mouse who is doing something — and a mouse who is doing something is a mouse who is not pacing a wall.

Rotating enrichment weekly

Mice habituate to their environment quickly — the same configuration of tubes and hides that produced peak exploration activity in week one produces dramatically less engagement by week four. Rotating one or two items per week — moving the wheel to a different corner, replacing a cardboard tube with a new shape, introducing a willow branch not previously present — maintains novelty and reduces the boredom that drives stereotypy. You do not need to replace everything at once; even small changes register to a mouse whose spatial map of her enclosure is detailed enough to notice that the center tube has moved six inches.

SECTION 8

Common Challenges & Solutions

Respiratory infection

What you see: rapid or labored breathing; clicking, crackling, or chattering sounds audible during normal respiration; a mouse who sits hunched with her fur fluffed; nasal discharge or wet fur around the nose and eyes; reduced activity during what should be the active evening hours; loss of appetite. **Why:** bacterial respiratory infection, most often involving *Mycoplasma pulmonis* — a bacterial pathogen that nearly all fancy mice carry subclinically throughout their lives, which surfaces as clinical disease when the immune system is compromised by cold temperatures, drafts, overcrowding, poor ventilation, or concurrent illness. Secondary bacterial infection following viral respiratory disease follows a similar pattern. Mice are uniquely vulnerable to mycoplasmosis: stress or husbandry failures tip a carrier mouse into clinical disease with very little warning. **What to do:** check enclosure temperature immediately — cold drafts or temperatures below 65°F are the most common precipitants; confirm the screen lid is unobstructed; isolate the affected mouse from cage mates if possible. **When to call a vet: within 24 hours of noticing any respiratory symptom.** Respiratory infections in mice advance very quickly — a mouse with mild clicking on Monday morning can be in critical condition by Tuesday evening. This is not a wait-and-see condition in an animal with a 1.5–3 year lifespan.

Malocclusion and dental disease

What you see: weight loss despite food being available in the enclosure; wet or matted fur on the chin and chest from drooling; visible difficulty picking up or chewing food; dropping food immediately after picking it up; incisors that appear unusually long, curved, or misaligned when viewed head-on; reduced gnawing on enrichment items. **Why: malocclusion** — misalignment of the upper and lower incisors — prevents normal tooth-on-tooth wear and allows one or both incisors to grow beyond functional length. The cause may be genetic (hereditary malocclusion runs in some fancy mouse lines), traumatic (an injury to the jaw or a tooth), or secondary to systemic disease. Overgrown incisors eventually curve into the opposing gum surface, making eating acutely painful. **What to do:** if you notice reduced eating, examine the incisors directly under good lighting. Weigh the mouse weekly — a 10–15% weight loss in a 25–30 gram mouse represents a clinical threshold worth acting on. Providing gnaw blocks consistently reduces but does not eliminate the risk from genetic malocclusion. **When to call a vet:** as soon as you observe any of the above signs. Incisor trims performed by an experienced exotic vet are a routine management procedure, but they should not be attempted at home — the anatomy is small and the margin for injury is narrow. Mice with genetic malocclusion often require regular trims throughout their lives.

Male-male fighting and injuries

What you see: bite wounds on the back, flanks, rump, and tail base; missing patches of fur; bloody wounds; one mouse actively pursuing and cornering the other; a mouse unable to move freely around the enclosure. **Why:** territorial aggression between unrelated bucks is not a risk to be managed — it is a near certainty once testosterone levels peak at 8–12 weeks of age. Bucks who appear to coexist in a pet store are almost always in a large, multi-exit environment with an established hierarchy maintained by available space. Reduce that space in a home enclosure and the same animals can fight to serious injury within days. The escalation is relentless; unlike doe squabbles, buck confrontations do not self-resolve. **What to do:** separate immediately and permanently at the first signs of any wounding. Do not reintroduce. Clean and assess wounds — shallow bites are common; deep puncture wounds near the body cavity, serious tail injuries, or wounds near the eye require same-day veterinary attention. House each buck in his own enclosure from this point forward. **When to call a vet:** any wound that is deep, near the eye or genitals, or that shows no sign of beginning to close within 24 hours; any mouse who is non-responsive, lethargic, or unable to move normally following a fight.

Mites

What you see: excessive scratching; scabs, crusting, or raw skin behind the ears, on the neck, across the shoulders, or along the spine; patchy or thinning fur in scratched areas; in a group, multiple mice showing the same symptoms simultaneously. **Why:** fur mites and skin mites — most commonly *Myobia musculi*, *Myocoptes musculinus*, or *Radfordia* species — are very common in fancy mice. Infestations can persist at low, subclinical levels for extended periods and become visibly apparent when the host's immune system is compromised or when mite population density exceeds the mouse's grooming capacity. New mice from pet stores frequently carry mites and can transfer them to existing animals, which is the most common route of introduction in a home collection. **What to do:** quarantine any new mouse for a minimum of two weeks before introducing to existing animals. For treatment, consult a veterinarian — **ivermectin** applied topically or given orally at the correct rodent dose is the standard treatment, but accurate dosing for a 25-gram mouse requires veterinary guidance. Treat all cage mates simultaneously even if symptom-free. Remove and replace all substrate; disinfect all enclosure surfaces, hides, and hard items; launder any fabric items. **When to call a vet:** any suspected mite infestation — accurate species identification and appropriate dosing both require professional input.

Uterine infection (pyometra) in intact does

What you see: a visibly distended abdomen, particularly in the lower half; lethargy and reduced activity; reduced food and water intake; vaginal discharge; a doe who looks clearly unwell but shows no respiratory symptoms. **Why: pyometra** — bacterial infection and accumulation of pus in the uterus — occurs in intact female mice, particularly those who have not been bred or who have had multiple pregnancies. Hormonal cycling without conception produces uterine environment changes that predispose to bacterial growth over time. The condition is more common in does over 12 months old. **What to do:** this is a veterinary emergency. Pyometra in small mammals progresses rapidly and untreated cases have very poor outcomes. **When to call a vet:** same day you observe the signs above — not the next morning, not after waiting overnight to see if she improves. Surgical and medical management options depend on the mouse's overall condition and the veterinarian's experience with rodent cases.

Stereotypic behavior

What you see: a mouse performing the same repetitive movement over and over without apparent purpose — running back and forth along one wall, climbing the same bar sequence repeatedly, circling in a fixed pattern, or digging persistently in a corner against the glass. The behavior continues for extended periods and does not lead to any goal-directed outcome. **Why: stereotypy** is a welfare indicator caused by a barren or insufficiently stimulating environment, social isolation (especially in does), or inadequate space. It is not a medical condition in itself, but it signals clearly that the animal's behavioral needs are unmet. In severe or long-standing cases the pattern becomes partially fixed and does not fully resolve even when the environment is later improved, which is why addressing it early matters. **What to do:** add enrichment immediately — more nesting material, new items, additional substrate depth; for a single doe, consider acquiring a compatible companion; review enclosure size and upgrade if the mouse is in a 10-gallon with other mice. Rotate enrichment weekly. **When to call a vet:** if behavior persists after significant environmental improvements, a veterinary consultation is appropriate to rule out pain, neurological causes, or metabolic disease as contributing factors.

Obesity and metabolic disease

What you see: a visibly rounded, heavy mouse; reduced running wheel use; a mouse who spends most of her active period at the food dish rather than exploring; difficulty moving through enrichment items that previously presented no challenge; a body that feels soft and doughy when gently handled. **Why:** obesity in fancy mice almost always traces to a high-fat diet — a seed mix as the primary food rather than a lab block, excessive treats, or unlimited access to high-fat seeds — combined with insufficient wheel activity. A mouse on a predominantly seed-based diet can develop obesity, fatty liver, and metabolic syndrome within months. **What to do:** transition to a lab block as the primary diet immediately; reduce or eliminate seed mixes from daily feeding; confirm the wheel is functioning and correctly sized; scatter-feed to encourage activity. **When to call a vet:** a mouse showing significant weight gain with concurrent respiratory symptoms, reduced mobility that limits normal function, or any mouse who has been on a consistently poor diet for many months.

Escape and recovery

What you see: the enclosure is occupied by fewer mice than it should be. **Why:** one clip not fully engaged, a screen lid resting under its own weight, a gap at the lid corner that appeared sealed but flexed under the mouse's sustained testing. Mice systematically investigate their enclosure perimeter on a nightly basis — they are methodical, and a gap that passes a visual check may not pass a sustained push from the inside. **What to do:** close the door to the room immediately to contain the search area. Mice seek warmth and enclosed spaces — search from floor level under and behind appliances, along baseboard gaps, under furniture, in closets and clothing piles, and inside any open boxes or containers. Leave the now-empty enclosure open with clean nesting material, food, and a warm hide near the escape site — a mouse who has been loose for 24 hours and is hungry will often return to a familiar scent. Damp paper towels laid flat on the floor overnight reveal foot-crossing marks from the mouse's paws. In a cool room, a mouse loose for more than a day may be cold and sluggish. **When to call a vet:** if found significantly dehydrated, in a cold-stunned state, or injured.

Mammary tumors

What you see: a firm or soft lump under the skin of the abdomen, chest, groin, or flanks in a doe; the lump may grow noticeably over days to weeks; the mouse maintains normal activity and appetite initially, but the tumor eventually reaches a size that impairs movement or grooming. **Why: mammary tumors** are the most common tumor type in female fancy mice, with incidence estimates in some studies reaching 50–90% of intact does over their lifetime. Many mammary tumors are benign fibroadenomas that grow locally without spreading; a smaller proportion are malignant. Spaying significantly reduces risk but is rarely performed given the surgical risk-benefit ratio in a mouse with a 1.5–3 year lifespan — the recovery burden often outweighs the benefit for an older doe. **What to do:** monitor the lump. A small, soft, freely mobile lump in a mouse who is otherwise active and eating normally can be monitored over days to weeks rather than requiring emergency intervention. A rapidly growing, hard, or ulcerating mass, or any lump in a mouse who is declining in condition, warrants a veterinary appointment. **When to call a vet:** any lump that has noticeably grown within a week, that is breaking through the skin surface, or that is visibly limiting mobility or causing the mouse to guard the area.

Quick reference

What you see	Likely cause	What to do	Vet urgency
Clicking or labored breathing, fluffed posture, hunching	Respiratory infection	Check temperature and drafts; isolate affected mouse	**Within 24 hours**
Weight loss, wet chin, incisors visibly overgrown or curved	Malocclusion / dental disease	Examine incisors; weigh; provide gnaw materials	Soon — dental trims must be performed by a vet
Bite wounds, fur loss, pursuit behavior	Male-male aggression	Separate immediately; assess wounds	Deep wounds, eye area, genitals, or immobility: same day
Scabs behind ears and shoulders, excessive scratching, thinning fur	Mites	Quarantine; consult vet for identification and dosing	Any suspected infestation: soon
Distended lower abdomen, lethargy, vaginal discharge in a doe	Pyometra (uterine infection)	Veterinary emergency	**Same day**
Repetitive pacing, circling, or bar-climbing without purpose	Stereotypy	Add enrichment; address social isolation; upgrade space	If persists after environmental correction: rule out pain
Rounded body, reduced wheel use, food-dish camping	Obesity / metabolic disease	Transition to lab block; check wheel; scatter-feed	If respiratory symptoms or mobility impact concurrent
Mouse not in enclosure	Escape	Room lockdown; systematic search; baited enclosure left open	If found cold, dehydrated, or injured

What you see	Likely cause	What to do	Vet urgency
Soft or firm lump under skin in a doe	Mammary tumor	Monitor size and growth rate	Rapid growth, ulceration, or mobility impact: book soon

SECTION 9

Handling & Taming

The speed problem

The first thing to understand about handling mice is that they move faster than most new owners expect — faster than rats, faster than hamsters, significantly faster than many animals of comparable size. A mouse who is not yet comfortable with her keeper does not sit still when a hand enters the enclosure. She runs at full speed, changes direction unpredictably, climbs the enclosure wall vertically, and is essentially impossible to intercept with a grabbing motion. New owners often make their first handling attempt by trying to catch the mouse quickly, discover this is not achievable, try harder, and by the third attempt have frightened the mouse and set taming back by a week.

The correct approach is the opposite of catching: **let the mouse come to you, at her pace, for as many sessions as it takes.** A tame mouse is not a captured mouse — she is a mouse who has decided that your hand is a safe, interesting surface often associated with food. Building that association takes days to weeks depending on the individual animal, and the pace is determined by the mouse, not by the owner's schedule.

Scooping technique

When a mouse is ready to be picked up, the correct method is to **scoop from below** — never grasp from above. Slide your cupped hand flat on the enclosure floor, palm facing up. Place a small food item on your palm. Wait. A tame mouse will step onto your palm within seconds. Lift slowly and keep your second hand positioned nearby as an additional platform — mice prefer to move from one hand to the other continuously rather than sitting in one place, and allowing this "hand treadmill" motion is the key to holding a mouse who would otherwise jump.

Grasping a mouse from above — fingers closing around the body from the top — triggers an acute predator-evasion response. It is exactly the posture of a raptor or cat attack, and mice have a hard-wired aerial threat response to anything descending from above. Even a mouse who is otherwise calm may bite if grasped this way. Scoop, never grab.

If it is necessary to briefly restrain a mouse for examination — checking the incisors, inspecting a wound — very gentle scruffing of the loose skin at the back of the neck is the technique used in veterinary settings. Do not use scruffing for routine handling; it causes stress and is not appropriate for daily interaction. It is a technique reserved for necessary brief examination.

Daily taming protocol for new mice

Days 1–2: No handling interaction. Sit near the enclosure, move slowly when close, and allow the mice to become aware of your presence at a distance.

Days 3–5: Open the lid and offer a small food item — a sunflower seed, a piece of leafy green — from a flat, still palm placed on the enclosure floor at mouse level. Do not reach toward the mice. Let them approach and take food from your palm. If they approach and eat without fleeing, this is meaningful progress.

Days 5–10: Once mice are approaching your palm consistently for food, allow them to step onto your palm by keeping it flat and still at floor level. Do not lift yet. Build the association between your hand and a positive outcome.

Days 10–14: When mice step onto your palm without hesitating, lift your hand very slightly — 2–3 inches off the enclosure floor — and let them step back down. Build up to full lifts over several sessions. Conduct the first full-lift sessions directly over the open enclosure in case of a jump.

Long-term: Handle daily for 5–10 minutes once taming is established. Mice maintained with consistent daily interaction remain tame; mice who are handled occasionally and unpredictably become more reactive over time. Taming is not a one-time achievement — it is maintained through regular contact.

Children

Mice can be excellent pets for children who are at a developmental stage where they can sit calmly and follow handling instructions. The primary risk is not aggression from the mouse — it is a drop from height if the child panics at the mouse's speed. Have children handle seated on the floor, always. An adult should be present for all handling sessions with young children, with hands immediately below as an immediate safety net. Teach children the scooping technique from the first session — never allow grabbing, for the child's safety as much as the mouse's.

A mouse who bites a child has almost always been frightened first. Investigate what triggered the response, correct the handling approach, and work through the taming protocol again from an earlier stage.

Reading stress signals

Signal	What it means	Response
Freezing in place, ears slightly flattened	High alertness — processing the perceived threat	Move slowly; offer food from the palm; wait
Active fleeing, rapid direction changes	Active fear response — too much pressure too soon	End the session; no further handling attempts that day; return to food-on-palm stage
Teeth chattering or grinding	Warning signal — the mouse is at the threshold	Set down calmly and end the session immediately
Biting	The limit was reached	Do not drop the mouse; set down calmly; assess what triggered it; adjust approach for the next session
Slow, exploratory movement on your hand, whiskers actively investigating	Comfortable and curious	This is the goal; allow the session to continue at the mouse's pace

SECTION 10

Routine Care Calendar

How often	What to do
Daily	Check the sipper bottle — full and flowing; replace immediately if empty or jammed
Daily	Verify ambient temperature is within 65–75°F
Daily	Check food — lab blocks available; remove any uneaten fresh food from the previous offering
Daily	Spot-check enclosure for wet areas near the water source or food station; remove soiled substrate if present
Daily	Observe mice at dusk — active? Alert? Normal posture? Wheel use occurring?
Daily	Confirm lid is fully closed with all clips or latches secured
Every 2–3 days	Spot-clean soiled substrate from high-traffic and elimination areas; replace with fresh bedding
Weekly	Full substrate change for a 10-gallon enclosure; leave a small amount of clean nesting material as a scent anchor for the group
Weekly	Scrub sipper bottle with a bottle brush; rinse thoroughly; check spout ball function
Weekly	Wash food dish; rotate one or two enrichment items for novelty
Weekly	Observe all mice during a brief handling session for any signs of injury, fight marks, or weight loss
Weekly	Weigh each mouse on a postal or kitchen scale; record and compare to the previous week — weight loss of 10% or more is a clinical threshold worth acting on
Weekly	Add fresh nesting material regardless of apparent supply
Monthly	Full enclosure deep clean — remove all decor; scrub all interior surfaces with a reptile-safe or unscented small-animal disinfectant; allow to dry completely before replacing
Monthly	Inspect all enrichment items for damage; replace splintered wood, worn wheel surfaces, or any item the mice have chewed through to a sharp edge
Monthly	Photograph the group from above for a body condition baseline to compare month over month
Every 6 months	Exotic small mammal veterinary wellness check; include a fecal exam for internal parasites; confirm no lumps, dental issues, or weight trends requiring attention
Annually	Full exam; discuss age-related changes and any dietary adjustments appropriate for mice over 18 months

SECTION 11

When to See a Vet

Mice are small animals who hide illness effectively until they cannot. The rule is: **when you are not sure whether to call, call.** In a species whose total lifespan may be 18–24 months, waiting three days to see if a symptom resolves is not patience — it is a meaningful fraction of that animal's remaining window.

Go today — same-day or emergency:

- Any clicking, crackling, or labored breathing — respiratory infections in mice escalate very quickly
- A mouse who is unresponsive, cannot move normally, or is lying flat without being in a natural sleep curl (mice sleeping naturally curl into a ball; a flat, unresponsive mouse is not sleeping)
- Active prolapse or any visible tissue protruding from the genital or rectal opening
- Severe bleeding that does not slow within a few minutes
- A doe with a visibly distended abdomen combined with lethargy — suspected pyometra
- Any mouse found severely cold and unresponsive after a room escape

Book within a few days:

- Any lump, mass, or skin growth found during a handling or weight-check session
- An incisor that appears overgrown, curved, or misaligned — especially with concurrent weight loss or reduced eating
- Persistent weight loss across two consecutive weekly weigh-ins with no identifiable dietary cause
- Excessive scratching, scabbing behind the ears or shoulders, or areas of thinning fur — suspected mites
- Reduced activity and appetite without respiratory symptoms — can indicate early organ disease, dental pain, or an internal mass
- A wound from fighting that is not beginning to close cleanly within 48 hours

Find your exotic small mammal vet now, before you need one. Confirm they see mice specifically — not every practice advertising exotic or small animal care has direct experience with *Mus musculus*, and dosing errors in a 25-gram animal happen quickly when the veterinarian is guessing rather than knowing. Bring a weight history, a diet log, and a clean fecal sample if you can collect one. The more context you give the vet about the mouse's baseline, the faster a cause can be identified.

SECTION 12

FAQ

What do pet mice eat?

The dietary foundation for a pet mouse is a **commercial lab block** — a complete pelleted rodent diet formulated to provide balanced nutrition as a sole food source. Good options include Mazuri Rodent Diet, Oxbow Essentials Mouse Food, and Science Selective Mouse; rat lab blocks are also appropriate for mice and work perfectly well. The reason lab blocks are recommended over seed mixes is **selective eating**: given a mixed food, mice pick the highest-fat seeds and leave behind the nutritionally complete components, creating deficiencies over time despite a food dish that always looks full. Small amounts of fresh food — a pinch of dark leafy greens, a pea-sized piece of cooked plain egg or chicken, a few seeds or grains scattered as foraging enrichment — supplement the lab block and provide variety consistent with wild feeding behavior. Fresh food should accent the lab block, never replace it. Never feed onions, garlic, grapes, raisins, raw beans, chocolate, or citrus peel to mice — all carry specific toxicity risks, and citrus peel in particular causes kidney damage in male mice.

How long do mice live?

Fancy mice live **1.5 to 3 years** with good care, and it is important to know this before purchasing rather than discovering it when a mouse begins declining at 18 months. The short lifespan is a significant part of what makes mouse keeping both accessible — a commitment of months to a few years rather than a decade — and emotionally compressing, because health changes that would unfold over months in a longer-lived animal move over days or weeks in a mouse. The factors most consistently associated with reaching the upper end of the range are correct temperature and ventilation maintained throughout life, a lab block diet rather than a seed mix, ample exercise via a correctly sized solid-surface wheel, prompt veterinary attention when problems appear, and appropriate social housing. Senior mice — those over 18 months — may slow down, reduce wheel use, and eat slightly less; this is normal aging and does not in itself require intervention, but any rapid change in condition warrants prompt evaluation.

Can male mice live together?

In nearly all cases, **no** — unrelated adult males should not be housed together. Bucks are territorial and fighting between unrelated males is not a risk to manage carefully; it is a near certainty once testosterone peaks at 8–12 weeks. Fights cause severe bite wounds, eye injuries, tail injuries, and death, and they escalate quickly — mice who appear to coexist on Monday can have serious injuries by Thursday. The two situations where buck cohabitation sometimes works are **littermate brothers** raised together from birth and never separated — even these pairs occasionally need to be separated at sexual maturity — and **castrated males**, who often integrate successfully into a doe group. If you want multiple mice living together, get does: two to four does housed together from a young age is a natural, low-conflict grouping that matches their social biology perfectly. One buck per enclosure is the standard rule, and it exists for good reason.

What size tank does a mouse need?

The minimum for one or two mice is a **10-gallon glass aquarium** with a secure screen lid that clips to the tank rim. A **20-gallon long** is the recommended upgrade for a group of two to four does and provides meaningfully more space for burrowing, wheel placement, and enrichment. A glass aquarium is strongly preferred over a wire cage for mice because: bar spacing on most wire cages is wider than ¼ inch and wide enough for mice to escape through; glass contains substrate at the 3–4 inch burrowing depth mice require; and glass is easier to clean and disinfect completely. The screen lid must clip to the tank rim — a lid that rests under its own weight will be pushed off by a mouse who has tested the perimeter and found that it moves.

Do mice need a wheel?

Yes — **a wheel is not optional**. Mice run 5 to 8 miles per night under normal activity conditions, and a solid-surface wheel at 6.5 to 8 inches in diameter is the only realistic way to provide that physical outlet in a home enclosure. A mouse kept without a wheel

develops stereotypic behavior, obesity, and typically a reduced lifespan — she is not simply "less active," she has no outlet for a core physical drive. The wheel must be **solid surface** — open wire wheels cause toe and tail injuries over time, and no other enrichment compensates for the absence of appropriate running opportunity. Silent-bearing wheels are the current standard; there is no reason to accept a squeaking wheel when silent options are widely available.

Are mice good pets for beginners?

Mice are good pets for beginners who enter with accurate expectations. Setup is inexpensive, daily care is low-effort, they are genuinely entertaining to observe, and the husbandry learning curve is not steep. The adjustments beginners need to make are: understanding the short lifespan honestly before purchasing; getting the sex-based housing rules right from the start (does in groups, bucks alone); using a lab block rather than a seed mix as the diet foundation; and locating an exotic vet who sees mice before a health problem develops. Hands-on handling takes consistent patience — mice are faster and more agile than most beginners expect, and taming requires daily interaction with the correct technique rather than occasional attempts to catch a quick animal. For families with children, mice in a properly set-up glass enclosure with daily handling exposure are a genuinely rewarding first pet, as long as adult supervision is in place for all handling sessions and the family understands and accepts the compressed lifespan.

How do you tame a mouse?

The core principle of mouse taming is **patience and approach from below**. Never attempt to grab a mouse from above — this triggers a hard-wired predator-evasion response and sets taming back significantly every time it happens. The correct method starts with presence: sit near the enclosure for several days so the mice become accustomed to your scent and movement without any handling pressure. Then offer a small food item from a flat, open palm placed still on the enclosure floor and let the mice come to you. Once they are approaching your palm consistently without fleeing, allow them to step onto your hand and begin building up to lifts over several subsequent sessions. Daily, brief sessions produce faster progress than occasional long ones. A mouse who runs from your hand after three weeks of sporadic contact is not a difficult mouse — she is an untamed one who has not had the consistent daily exposure that builds the association between your hand and safety.

Do mice smell?

Honestly, **yes — bucks noticeably, does much less so**. Male mice produce a musky urine odor that is significantly stronger than female mice and is the primary reason odor-sensitive households are consistently advised to choose does. The smell from bucks in a properly maintained enclosure is manageable but real, and it registers in the room where the enclosure is kept. For does, the odor is mild and managed readily with regular cleaning. The practical management tools are: clean on schedule (spot-clean every 2–3 days, full substrate change weekly to every 10 days); avoid placing the enclosure in a bedroom where air exchange is low and smell accumulates overnight; and use paper-based bedding, which absorbs urine and controls ammonia more effectively than wood shavings. Ammonia from urine — not the musky odor itself — is the more significant health concern; a clean enclosure with an unobstructed screen lid keeps ammonia at safe levels for both mice and the humans sharing the space.

How often should I clean a mouse cage?

For a **10-gallon enclosure** with one or two mice: spot-clean soiled areas every 2–3 days and do a full substrate change weekly. For a **20-gallon long** with a group of two to four does: spot-clean every 2–3 days; full change every 10–14 days with consistent spot-cleaning in between. The actual cleaning signal is smell — urine odor detectable from three feet away means cleaning was due yesterday regardless of what the calendar says. On the other end: changing the entire enclosure more than once a week removes all familiar scent from the nesting area and causes social stress in groups who rely on shared scent to maintain group cohesion. When doing a full change, always leave a small amount of clean nesting material from the previous setup as a scent anchor.

Can mice and rats live together?

No. Mice and rats should never be housed together. Rats are natural predators of mice — this is not a theoretical risk or a personality-dependent variable. A rat who is gentle and social with humans can and does kill mice, often quickly, and the size difference makes it impossible for a mouse to defend herself or escape. Beyond the direct predation risk, rats carry several respiratory pathogens that are harmless to rats and clinically serious in mice, including Pneumonia Virus of Mice (PVM). Even a well-socialized rat who has never shown aggression is not safe housing for a mouse. Keep mice with mice and rats with rats.

> ***Ready to shop?*** *Start with Critters!. 10% of every purchase supports no-kill animal shelters. Not sure this is the right pet? Compare your options in our Small Animal Guide.*

SECTION 13

Every Purchase Gives Back

Before we earn a dime, **10% of every purchase at Walnut Creek Supply goes to no-kill animal shelters across the country.** Not at checkout as an option. Not as a round-up campaign. Off the top of every order, every day — because responsible pet ownership and community care belong together, not as separate transactions.

Fancy mice are surrendered to rescues in larger numbers than most people realize — usually after the novelty wears off, or when the owner's schedule changes, or because "they only live a couple years anyway" became a reason not to invest further in their care. The mice who arrive at rescues are not inferior animals. They are often curious, approachable, and fully capable of bonding with a new keeper who understands what they actually need. If you can adopt rather than purchase, check your local small animal or exotic rescue — mice move through these organizations quickly and a rescue mouse is typically already partially socialized and assessed by staff who know the species.

We are a family business in Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. We grow our own food, keep our own animals, and stock only what we would put in front of our own pets — **no mystery ingredients**, no cedar shavings, no wire wheels sold as appropriate for mice. If you have a question about your mouse's enclosure, her diet, whether the group dynamic looks normal, or whether the lump you found this morning warrants a same-day call, phone us at **(717) 983-8069**. We would rather talk you through it.

Welcome to 1.5 to 3 years of small, fast, opinionated animals who will rearrange their bedding exactly the way they want it and run further in one night than you will walk in a week.

From our family to yours, **Walnut Creek Supply** — Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania *walnutcreeksupply.com*