

## Rat Associates Owner With Medication

**An owner asks what could have caused a pet rat's behavior changes.**

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**Q:** I have a little blue rat that I have been giving medication to for about a week. Before this we were great friends, and he liked to snuggle and such (he is still fairly young and small). But now he freaks out when I reach in there to just pet him. He runs around the cage wildly and doesn't even want me to touch him. What should I do to make him feel comfortable again? Is this because of the medication?

**A:** There are likely two reasons for your rat's behavior toward you. It could be as you stated: your friend has now become conditioned to the fact that when you come near it, your rat thinks it is getting medication. Or the other reason may be related to why it was getting medication in the first place. Was your rat getting medication for something painful? Possibly, it is still sick and would rather not be touched or snuggled with. In that case, you may want to have the doctor give your rat a clean bill of health.

But more likely, because rats are very smart, it associates you with medication, which was something your rat did not enjoy. Maybe it did not like being picked up and held for medication. Maybe your rat did not like the taste of the medication. Maybe your rat didn't like a syringe being put into its mouth to get the medication.

No matter which of the three is true, you need to reverse its thinking with positive reinforcement. You need to "remake" friends with your rat. This is best done with a treat that you know it really enjoys but rarely gets from you. Try to have your rat associate the treat with you. With it in the cage (your rat's safe place), put a treat in the cage, stand back, and let your rat inspect the treat and eat it. Do this for a few days or even longer. Eventually, your rat will associate you with the treat and not run away. Once you have established this, try to pick it up and have the treat in your other hand. Let your rat step on one hand with the treat in the other. Hopefully, it will continue to trust you and associate you with a fun treat and not with medication.