

RATS

What do rats look like?

The common rat typically has brownish fur on its back and is grey underneath, but colour can vary from white through to black. The adult body length is 200-270mm, plus a tail length of 150-200mm. The ship rat (smaller, black and with hairless ears) is nowadays rarely encountered in Britain. Rats have excellent senses of smell and taste. They have an acute sense of hearing, frequently using ultrasound to communicate, and are particularly sensitive to any sudden noise.

Where do they live?

Common rats live in any situation that provides food, water and shelter. In homes, they will live in roof spaces, wall cavities or under floorboards. In gardens, they will burrow into compost heaps and grassy banks or under sheds. Rats are often found living in sewer systems; they are agile climbers and excellent swimmers.

What do they eat?

Preferred foods are cereal products, although rats are omnivorous and will eat almost anything that humans eat. Most damage caused by rats is through gnawing and ripping open packets of food. They also spoil and contaminate food with urine, droppings and hairs. Up to 5% of food produced worldwide is lost as a result of rodent activity. Unlike mice, rats require water every day.

The Council provides information leaflets on the following range of pests:

Ants
Bedbugs
Cockroaches
Fleas
Flies
Mice
Pigeons
Rats
Slugs
Spiders
Wasps

RATS

What are the signs of infestation?

Sightings of live rats or droppings

Rats are particularly active at night, but may be seen during the day searching for food, water or shelter. Common rat droppings are capsule-shaped, (tapered at both ends), black and up to 12mm long. A rat will leave about 40 droppings a day. Fresh droppings will be soft and moist.

Runs

Rats follow the same routes when moving around and often leave trails through grass and low vegetation.

Footprints, smears and tail swipes

These can be seen on muddy or dusty surfaces. Smears are dark grey marks left on surfaces by repeated contact with the oils in rat fur.

Burrows

Rats can build complex tunnel systems, which often extend deep into the ground. Entrance holes 70-120mm in diameter will be seen in grassy banks, under tree roots and at the edge of paving or drain cover surrounds.

Nests

Sometimes nests can be found indoors, in lofts or under floorboards.

Gnawing

Rats gnaw continually to wear down their front teeth, even on non-food materials such as electrical cables, pipework and wooden fixtures.

Why must rats be controlled?

Rats can transmit many diseases to humans, including Salmonellosis (food poisoning) and Weil's disease, usually from the urine of infected rats.

Rats may also cause considerable damage to buildings, foundations and other structures due to gnawing and burrowing.

How can I prevent rat infestation?

Householders can assist in preventing rat infestation by taking a number of simple precautions.

- Keep your home in good repair; rats only need a gap of 15mm to gain entry.
- Remove potential nesting sites by keeping yards and gardens clean and tidy, and by cutting back overgrown areas.
- Ensure that drain inspection covers are in place and are in good repair.
- Seal gaps around heating and water pipes.
- Ventilation bricks and slots should already have a fine wire mesh incorporated. If this is worn, replace it externally with 3.15mm insect mesh.
- Do not leave household waste where rats can get access to it, close dustbin lids and composters and do not feed wild birds to excess - you may be feeding rats as well.

How can I get rid of rats?

Rats are adaptable, highly mobile and breed rapidly to produce large rat infestations. This combination can make rat control a difficult task for the untrained individual.

If you decide to carry out the work yourself there are two options - poison or break back traps:-

Poison (rodenticide) can be bought from most hardware stores and most garden centres. Put the poison in a safe and secure place out of reach of children and pets and ALWAYS wash your hands after use. Use of rodenticide can take 4-12 days to take effect. This may result in a localised foul smell due to the presence of carcasses.

Break-back traps should be placed next to walls where rats tend to travel. The trap should be baited with chocolate, biscuit or cereal. Most rats are wary of new objects placed in their environment and will avoid them for a period of time. So do not set the spring on the trap until bait has been eaten then re-bait and reset the trap. Use several traps and examine them daily, removing dead rats as soon as they are discovered. All traps should be handled with care.

Seek professional advice from the Council's Environmental Health Service if you require any assistance.

Warning: When using pesticides always follow the instructions on the label. Remember that pesticides may be harmful to other animals e.g. household pets etc.

