

Rats and Mice

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During the cooler months of the year the Environmental Health Officers at Marlborough District Council have an increase in the number of rat and mice complaints. The health legislation that we work to stipulates any premises in a state that harbours or is likely to harbour rats or other vermin is a nuisance and we can be called on to investigate. In addition, we can require the occupier or owner to take all necessary steps to get rid of the problem. This pamphlet is designed to give you some understanding of the problem and how to overcome it.



What to do about rats and mice

To discourage or get rid of rats and mice you need to attack the problem on three fronts:

- Clean up rubbish and other places where rats and mice may feed.
- Keep them out of houses and other buildings by closing off any access points.
- Eliminate them with traps or poison.

Even if you haven't noticed any signs of rodents, regularly check for rubbish or possible rodent sites.

Keep them out

Rats and mice are very mobile and can get into buildings in all sorts of ways. They can climb vertical surfaces and gnaw through walls and gaps around windows and doors. Mice need a hole only 12mm wide while rats can squeeze through holes not much bigger. They are also good swimmers using waterways and sewers. You should:

- Seal holes around pipes into buildings with cement or metal sheathing.
- Make sure doors and windows fit tightly and repair any damage.
- Screen all holes and gaps into basements and houses with fine wire mesh.

Habits

Rats and mice live in nests built out of paper, sacking, rugs, and other odds and ends. Mice nest mostly inside—in walls, unused cupboards, boxes or stored goods and other warm areas such as behind refrigerators.

Norwegian rats generally nest outdoors in burrows dug under the floors of houses, sheds and other buildings, in piles of rubble or timber, in rubbish or compost heaps, or refuse tips. The ship rat, on the other hand, often lives in the ceiling space of houses nesting in insulation material.

This means you need to:

- Clean up inside. Old newspapers or magazines, boxes, rags and junk in cupboards, spare rooms and basements provide ideal nesting places for rodents. In kitchens especially, any neglected corner or cupboard, including the hotwater cupboard and behind the refrigerator, can become a home for mice.
- Clean up outside. Piles of bricks, timber, rubble, derelict cars or appliances, heaps of garden rubbish and overgrown parts of the section can be used by rats and mice for nesting. Trees overhanging eaves can provide access for rats to ceiling space and attics.
- Composting should be carried out in properly constructed compost bins. A rodent-proof floor is a good idea to stop burrowing.



- Make sure rubbish bins have tight fitting lids and they are always kept on.
- Fix dripping taps and don't let water collect in buckets or tins outside.
- Don't leave food for pets or birds out overnight where rats can get at it.

They've been around for ages— Interesting facts on rats and mice

Rats and mice have lived with humans for centuries and have been responsible for spreading the bubonic plague, which killed millions of people in Europe in the past 500 years. There were even cases of plague spread by rats in Auckland in the early 1900s. (Maclean—"Challenge for Health", 1964)

Wipe them out

Poison and traps are the best ways of killing rats and mice.

Poison baits

Baits are the most effective form of rat control. With all baits, follow the instructions on the packet carefully and remember:

- Keep pets and children out of danger by putting bait inside a piece of drainage pipe or box with 75mm holes in each end.
- Use fresh bait and protect it from the weather. Wax coated bait is available for outside use, and can be purchased from garden and agricultural centres.
- Leave baits down for at least two weeks after the rodent activity appears to have ceased. Remember, modern baits take some time to work so keep replacing any bait taken making as little disturbance as possible.
- For mice, put down a number of bait stations fairly close together. This will ensure they eat enough as they tend to nibble a little of each.
- Use disposable gloves when handling bait and always wash your hands thoroughly afterwards.

Traps

Traps work well for catching mice. Set several close together and ensure the bait is firmly attached.

Rats on the other hand are smarter and tend to avoid traps. They learn quickly to stay away from them if they have previously set one off. Remember:

- If setting a trap inside, it's best to put it close to the wall at right angles with the trigger nearest the wall.
- A good strategy is to bait, but not set, the trap for several days to get the rat used to feeding from it.
- For outside trapping, put the trap in a burrow entrance or on rat runs if these are obvious. It is advisable to tie the bait on and secure the trap firmly, otherwise you may lose both the trap and the rat.
- Always use rubber gloves when removing dead rats. Wash your hands afterwards.

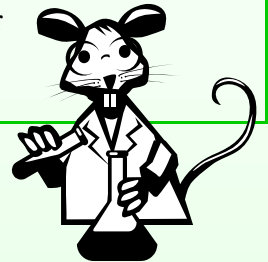
Life cycle

Rats and mice usually live for six to 36 months. Norwegian rats are able to breed every two to three months and can produce a litter of eight to 12 offspring each time. It doesn't take long for numbers to build up if left unchecked.

Mice begin to breed at one to two months. Their litters tend to be smaller but more frequent and therefore populations can increase even more rapidly than rats.

Types of rats and mice

In New Zealand we have the house mouse and three species of rat. The most common species of rat is the Norwegian rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), also known as the sewer, water, or brown rat. It is larger than the other main species, the ship rat (*Rattus rattus*), often referred to as the roof or black rat, and the little seen Kiore (*Rattus exulans*).



For further information or assistance contact your Environmental Health Officer, Marlborough District Council, PO Box 443, Blenheim 7240