

Rats



Description

- Britain is home to two kinds of rat.
 - The ship rat (*Rattus rattus*), also known as the black rat, is rare in the United Kingdom and is not described further in this page.
 - The common rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), also known as the brown rat or sewer rat, is the most abundant and widespread species and is found throughout the United Kingdom. All that it needs to thrive is shelter, food and water.
- The adult may weigh from 100 to 500 grams (3½ to 18 ounces).
- They are about 240 mm long (9½ inches) excluding the tail.
- They have brown fur on their back and grey fur underneath. They have a tail which is shorter than its head and body.



In comparison, the house mouse is much smaller weighing only 30 grams (one ounce). Mice are about four inches long excluding their tail. They have large ears in relation to their body with small feet and a tail which is longer than their body.

Lifestyle

- Rats need shelter, food and water to survive.
- Rats are efficient burrowers and favour compost heaps and the ground underneath hedges and sheds, where they will dig shallow burrows and form nests with dry grass and leaves. In houses they will nest in wall cavities and beneath floorboards.
- Rats are good climbers and can climb vertical brick walls. They are good swimmers and are at home in sewers where they have food, water and shelter.
- The front teeth of rats grow continuously and to keep the teeth to a useful length the rat needs to gnaw on hard objects all the time. Such objects can include lead water pipes, brickwork, electric cables, wood and anything else available.
- Rats are usually active at night but may also be active in daytime. They usually have well worn runs between their living area and their source of food and water.
- The life expectancy of a rat is around one year, during which time a female will typically breed five times with an average litter of eight. Female rats will have their first litter at the age of four months.

Significance

Rats **are** a major hazard to health. They spread many forms of disease, especially through their droppings and urine. Some of these diseases can be fatal to man, such as leptospirosis, although the incidence of such diseases is rare.

They may eat food which is intended for human consumption and they often damage much more which has to be discarded. Through their gnawing habit they can cause considerable structural damage to woodwork, water pipes, electric cables etc..

Signs of Infestation

- **damage** - caused by gnawing, holes, smears and droppings. Packaging will often show tooth marks - the size of which will indicate whether it is a rat or a mouse.
- **holes** - made by the rats in doors and walls, and the entrances to nests, are about 80mm (three inches) in diameter, and nests may be made in wall and floor cavities.

- **rat runs** - having established the best route from one place to another, rats tend to use this route frequently. This run becomes soiled with the grease and other dirt on the rat's fur and will be very apparent in even moderate infestations.
- **footprints** - are sometimes apparent on soft or dusty surfaces
- **rat droppings** - the amount of rat droppings present is a good indication of the size of the infestation and how long they have been there.

Control

Removal of food, water and harborage will deny rats their three main requirements for survival. The infestation should be controlled by using bait. This can be bought from chemists, hardware shops and garden centres. To be effective, baits must be readily available for the rat, but should not be accessible to other animals or humans, and extra care is needed if there are children in the house. The safety precautions and instructions given on the packaging must be adhered to. It is essential that all other food sources are removed in order to force the rats into eating the poison bait.

The amount of bait to be used and the frequency of topping up will be recommended on the product label. It will take several days to start with before the rats will feed freely. When no more poison is being taken the infestation has been eradicated and all baits should be removed. Repair of damage caused by rats may be required, and proofing of the premises from further access to the property is essential. Rats that have taken poison bait will go back to their nest where they will die and it is possible that this will cause a smell. How long the smell lasts will depend upon how warm the nest is but will go off after a short while. It is not recommended that any attempt is made to find the nest as this is usually very difficult.

It is possible to use rat traps similar to mice traps but larger in size but these are not recommended. They are capable of badly hurting someone who sets the trap off by mistake or makes a mistake when setting them. They also have the disadvantage that rats caught in the trap have to be disposed of.

Pest Control Service

Spelthorne Borough Council provides a service for the treatment of domestic premises infested with rats at a subsidised rate of £30.00 for three visits) Should you require a treatment, please contact Spelthorne's Customer Services on 01784 451499 or e-mail customer.services@spelthorne.gov.uk