



Advice about rats

If you become aware of rats in your garden or house, the most important thing is not to ignore the situation. Rats breed at a fast rate (approximately one litter a month and up to 6 litters a year and the young become sexually mature in 8-12 weeks), so a couple of rats can become a colony in quite a short space of time.

Description

Rats are a larger than other rodents you might see in your garden such as mice or voles with an average head/body length of 20 - 27 cm (8 - 11 ins) and a tail length of 16.5 - 20.5 cm (6.5 - 8 ins). A young rat may look very much like a mouse, though, except that its head will be larger in proportion to its body than a mouse and its tail will be thicker and hairless.



Rats are brown or brownish grey, or occasionally black in colour.

Health risks

Rats can spread diseases such as **salmonella** and the form of leptospirosis known as **Weil's disease** to humans. Also, rats' teeth grow very quickly and they have to gnaw in order to wear them down. Rats can gnaw through most materials found in our environment, including some soft metals such as aluminium and lead. This means they may chew through electrical cables or gas and water pipes leading to costly damage or even a fire risk.

What to look for

Rats are mainly active at night, but if they are sighted during the day this may mean that a) there is a lack of food available or b) that there are lots of rats in the area and therefore there is more competition for food.

The way in which rats spread depends on the whether of food, water and shelter are available. The time of year also affects the way they act – in the autumn and winter they will move from fields and hedgerows towards the cover of homes and gardens. They will create **burrows** and often these are visible as holes (up to 10cm wide) in flowerbeds and lawns. They will also seek shelter in and/or under sheds and other outbuildings and so residents may be able to see areas where earth has been disturbed and/or gaps have appeared under these buildings. Areas that are **overgrown** or piles of bulky refuse can also provide shelter. In some cases a network of tunnels with several entrances can be formed that can spread across the boundaries of several properties.

Rats will tend to have a restricted area of normal movement and follow regular routes. These are known as '**runs**' and may be visible to householders as earth or grass will be worn down where the rats have repeatedly moved backwards and forwards along the same route. If there is food and water close to the burrow rats will very rarely venture any further than they have to.

As well as visual sightings of rats or evidence of burrows or runs, residents may also notice evidence of gnawing.

Rats are excellent at climbing and jumping. They can climb a vertical surface if it is rough and can brace themselves between a wall and a drainpipe. They can jump to a height of about 70cm (over 2 feet). Along with being able to use cables and beams, this explains how they are able to enter lofts and roof spaces, although they can also reach these areas by entering at ground level and moving up through the wall cavity. Residents with **ponds** also need to be vigilant as rats also need a regular supply of water to survive.

Prevention

As mentioned above, rats need food, water and shelter. Keeping food sources out of their reach will make a big difference to where they decide to set up home. Leaving **domestic rubbish** outside in bin bags often attracts rats and so it is recommended such waste is put in dustbins or left inside the house until the day of collection. Try not to pile up bulky items in your garden which may provide shelter and prevent your garden from becoming overgrown.

Residents who keep/feed **pets** outside should be aware that this can also attract rats to their garden. Animals kept outside, such as rabbits and guinea pigs should, where possible, have their hutches raised off the ground and food should be kept secure. People keeping chickens and pigeons should make sure that uneaten food is not left out and that any that falls on the ground is cleared up.

Feeding wild birds can also attract rats to the garden which is bad news for the birds as well as rats will steal nesting sites and even invade birds' nests and eat eggs. Using a bird table or hanging birdfeeders will reduce the chances of rats getting at the birds' food. However, rats are very resourceful and will climb bird tables, walls and branches to get at food.

What to do

If you see rats in the garden check for burrows and runs and, if there are any, contact the Council to discuss **pest control**. If you do feed the birds, stop until the treatment is complete as the provision of food will interfere with the treatment.

If you have a rat infestation on your property **it is an offence not to take appropriate action**. The Council is contacted by many residents complaining that their neighbour has rats and is not doing anything about it and has a duty to investigate these complaints.

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