

Rats: Prevention and control



Rats are very adaptable public health pests. They are not fussy eaters and can make themselves at home in houses, sheds, garages and gardens. They are not only smelly and destructive, but can pose a risk to human health

Why the concern?

Rats can:

- transmit diseases such as leptospirosis, typhus fever and rat-bite fever
- contaminate food with their hair, droppings and urine resulting in food poisoning and wastage
- generate unpleasant odours
- carry fleas or ticks which can harm pets or humans.

Rats are destructive and can cause damage with their gnawing and digging. They can damage materials such as food containers, wood, particle board, insulation and wiring – gnawing of electrical wires may cause fires.

Types of rats

The most common types of rats found in Australia are:

- Black, or Roof Rat (*Rattus rattus*) has uniform fur colour of grey, brown, or black and may be white underneath, with a small body and large tail and likes to climb
- Brown or Norway Rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) has dark brown to black fur with a large body and small tail and likes to burrow and swim.

Rats will eat rubbish, pet food, food scraps in composts, fallen fruit and nuts, bird seed and dog faeces and will travel up to several house blocks to find water and food.

Where do rats live?

Rats shelter and nest in places such as homes, sheds, garages and gardens, particularly:

- in walls, ceilings and under floors
- behind or under cupboards or bathtubs
- near hot water heaters
- behind boxes, machinery and furniture or in paper or cloth
- in rubbish heaps, wood piles, thick vegetation or animal enclosures
- in holes under buildings.

Spot the rat!

Rats are generally more active at night and are more common in late summer/early autumn. If you see rats during the day, this usually indicates high numbers or a good food supply.

To check whether rats are present look for:

- black, moist, thin (12mm to 18mm long) droppings
- debris left from rats gnawing items like snail shells, almond shells and chop bones
- uneaten food left for pets which has gone missing
- signs of gnawing on fruit and vegetables
- “runways” which have formed when rats have used the same path such as through vegetation/gardens or along fences.



Public Health Fact Sheet

- greasy rub marks where rats travel regularly
- burrow holes close to sheds or under debris
- signs of gnawing damage to materials such as wood, insulation and electrical cabling.

Listen for pet dogs, cats, birds being more excitable than usual.

You may hear squeaking, gnawing or movement noises in walls, cupboards and ceilings and under floors.

Avoiding rat problems

Rats are well adapted to living in human environments. To reduce the number of rats on your property:

- ensure rubbish bins have tight-fitting lids and are regularly emptied
- keep your home and property clear of rubbish
- keep stacked materials such as wood and bricks at least 30cm above the ground to minimise hiding/nesting/thoroughfare of rats
- regularly clean out sheds, storage areas and dispose of unwanted items
- remove unwanted undergrowth - cut back grass, trees, bushes, and creepers which may provide cover or access to the roof
- dispose of fallen fruit, seed and waste from aviaries and chicken pens and pet faeces
- do not use open compost heaps
- do not compost any animal products (fish, meat, chicken, cheese, butter) or pet faeces
- leave out just enough pet food for pets to eat soon after it is placed there
- store poultry food in vermin proof containers with close-fitting lids

- block access points to cupboards containing food and food-preparation utensils
- inspect and repair any cracks, crevices or holes in buildings and sheds with concrete, hard setting filler, steel wool or heavy gauge sheet metal
- cover rainwater tank openings and floor vents with wire mesh no coarser than 1mm and check and maintain these regularly.

Protecting yourself

If rats are present:

- secure all foodstuffs in sealed containers
- throw away food or drink that may have come into contact with rats
- cookware and cutlery in warm water and detergent before use
- wash hands thoroughly before preparing food, eating, drinking or smoking
- wear shoes and don't lie/sleep on the floor/ground.

If you are bitten by a rat, consult your doctor promptly.

Chemical control

- Chemical control is generally short-term and rats will return if food and shelter are still available.
- Rat poisons or rodenticides containing an anti-coagulant can be purchased from hardware stores or supermarkets.
- Extreme care must be taken when using rat poisons (read instructions carefully) to prevent the danger of children or pets being accidentally poisoned.
- Rat baits should be placed in locations away from open spaces.

Chemical control for some situations may not be appropriate.

Public Health Fact Sheet

Some disadvantages of poisoning rats need to be considered:

- if rats die and decay in hard to reach places they may cause an odour
- the risk of pets eating toxic baits or poisoned rat bodies
- chemical sensitivities of individuals to rat control chemicals in their environment

Trapping may be more appropriate in some situations.

Trapping

Several traps should be used at one time. Traps can be purchased from hardware stores or supermarkets.

Some tips for setting traps:

- Do not set traps near food preparation areas.
- Place across "runways" for a few days before setting to allow rats to get used to the traps.
- Traps can be successfully set with bacon, peanut butter, fish, meat, bread or chocolate.
- Check traps daily, remove any dead rats and refresh the bait.
- Use an insecticidal surface spray around the immediate area to kill any fleas leaving the rat's body.

Disposal of dead rats

Dead rats can be buried or wrapped and placed into a domestic rubbish bin. Gloves should be worn where possible when handling rats.

Remember to wash your hands with warm water and soap immediately after handling rats.

Council involvement

Your local council can provide advice on pest control and may provide rodent baiting services or lend traps.

Council may investigate rodent infestations following complaints, and if there is evidence of rat infestation or conditions likely to attract them, may enforce a cleanup of possible food sources and rat nesting sites.

Remember, it is the responsibility under public and environmental health legislation for owners and occupiers of premises to prevent rats from living and breeding on their property.

Further information

If you believe you have a rat infestation at home or nearby, contact:

- your local council Environmental Health Officer
- the Department of Health on 8226-7100 or go to our website: www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/environmental-health-index.htm.
- Primary Industries and Resources SA (PIRSA) for rodent control advice for primary industry – 8226-0222

Contact

Applied Environmental Health
Public Health
SA Health

1st floor, Citi Centre Building
11 Hindmarsh Square
Adelaide SA 5000

PO Box 6, Rundle Mall
Adelaide SA 5000

Tel 08 8226 7100
Fax 08 8226 7102
ABN 97 643 356 590

Email: public.health@health.sa.gov.au
Web: www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/environmental-health-index.htm

© Department of Health,
Government of South Australia.
All rights reserved.

Last revised October 2008

