

America's rodent problem by the numbers

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There is nothing quite as frightening, disturbing or violating as discovering your home has been breached by rodents or other small critters. Perhaps you discovered chewed wires in the basement garage, droppings in your kitchen or tiny footprints in the garage — whatever you found, you likely want those little critters out, and now.

Rodent infestations are a serious, growing issue in the United States, and not just because rodents are “pests” or minor annoyances, but because infestations can affect your safety and health, according to the National Pest Management Association. Mice and rats carry diseases, aggravate asthma and allergies and increase the risk of fire by chewing through electrical wires. And, of course, nobody wants droppings in the basement or kitchen cupboard.

The widespread nature of rodent infestations

You may be surprised to learn that rodents invade 21 million U.S. homes each winter. In fact, a recent survey from pestworld.org found that 37 percent of Americans have spotted a rodent in their home in the last year. That means you or one of your neighbors has likely had a rodent problem. Yikes!

A multiplying problem

While it's tempting to shrug off a single mouse or rat sighting on your property, don't ignore it. Why? If you see one rodent in your home, it's safe to assume there are more. Rodent infestation is literally a growing issue, as a female mouse breeds quickly and can lay as many as 12 young every three weeks. You should also be concerned if you see a rodent indoors or on your property because they can contaminate and ruin food, and they may carry salmonella and disease-causing parasites like ticks, fleas and lice.

Where and when most infestations occur

About half of home infestations occur in the kitchen. Make your kitchen less attractive for rodents by keeping it clean and crumb-free and by storing food in rodent-proof containers. You should be most concerned about mice and rats entering your home as weather cools. About 45 percent of infestations in the United States occur in fall and winter.

Small and sneaky invaders

Small rodents can fit through even the tiniest openings to enter your home or garage, so be on the lookout for potential entrance areas. Rats can squeeze through openings the size of a quarter, and mice can wriggle through openings as small as a dime. Prevent rodent infestation by sealing cracks and holes on the outside of the home (especially under doors and around pipes) and by replacing loose mortar and weather stripping around the basement foundation and windows.

Health and safety hazards

Rodents are also a serious safety hazard to your property because they like to chew through wood, insulation and electrical wires, which increases the risk of fires. Rodents have "open-rooted incisors," or four long, sharp teeth that grow continuously throughout their lives. These teeth enable mice and rats to gnaw continuously without wearing down their teeth, wreaking havoc on homes throughout the country.

If you need motivation to act quickly to prevent rodent infestations, consider that mice urinate constantly and are capable of dropping up to 25,000 fecal pellets each year. Maintain a safe, clean and healthy home by taking steps now to avoid rodent problems.