

According to a report in the Independent, commuters in the Spanish city have filmed rats climbing in the trees and among the rubbish near the Menendez Pelayo Metro train station in the city.

How much of a problem is this?

It depends on who you talk to. Witnesses suggest that the rodents are black rats which are large (between 20cm and 50cm long) and unafraid of cats, dogs or even humans.

But officials in Madrid have denied that there is any evidence that the rat population is growing in the city. In 2019, the council revealed that rats were present in 10 areas in the city, but added that they were not thought to be a threat to public [health](#).

Well, how many rats are we talking about?

City authorities estimate that Madrid is home to around nine million rats, rather more than the human population of the city which currently stands at 6.6million.

Are there any explanations as to why these rats should be now so visible in the city?

Madrid had its first snow blizzard in 50 years last month which caused problems for rubbish collection in many areas in the city. Rats were subsequently spotted in the refuse.

There may also be a Covid-19 angle. Last year there were worldwide concerns that the absence of humans in the streets as a result of the pandemic would encourage pests to emerge from hiding as we were leaving less waste in the streets and they needed to venture out more to find food.

How is the pandemic impacting on pest control?

Both the UK and Spain saw a rise in cockroaches and flies last summer. Last June, the British Pest Control Association also reported a spike in rat infestation in the UK in the wake of lockdown. A town in Malaga, meanwhile, spent thousands of euros buying *torymus sinensis* wasps, the natural predator of Chinese chestnut wasps, in a bid to protect chestnut production in the area.

In the UK in 2021 pest control remains an essential service in the eyes of the government.

Should we be scared of rats anyway?

Rats can transmit rat bite fever, Weil's Disease, salmonellosis and hantavirus to humans. So, best avoided.

We do seem to have a natural aversion to rats, don't we?

Rats and humans have history. Black rats were infamous for transmitting the bubonic plague (better known as the Black Death) which killed some 25 million people in Europe in the 14th century.

Much of our antipathy towards rats comes from the folk memory of that plague, although scientists in recent years have queried whether rats were the true culprits. Theories have been advanced suggesting that the Black Death may have been spread by everything from lice and fleas to gerbils.