



Storm debris hiding infestation for months, rats waiting to get inside your home

OKLAHOMA CITY, OK — Brush or branches left in front of homes from the October ice storm could become a potential health risk for homeowners if not cleaned before Spring.

For weeks, FOX 25 Investigates has been hitting the streets to learn how the pandemic has affected our homeless population.

During our research, our team came across another health risk that could not only affect the homeless but homeowners as well, especially if storm debris remains outside of your home.

“As we looked around, there were other, other areas of great concern, and that would be a public health issue,” Sherry Brack said, Oklahoma City-County Health Department supervisor for food safety and environmental health.

During a January interview near the Salvation Army off N. Pennsylvania Avenue, FOX 25 Investigates found dozens of rats tunneling through the area.

“You could have one-hundred rats out here no problem. Wouldn’t surprise me at all,” Edwin Conant said with Get ‘Em Pest Control.

Conant said the area, frequented by those experiencing homelessness, was surrounded by trash.

“There’s a restaurant, off to one side that had overflowing garbage from their dumpsters. So, that was a big issue. They had food and their dumpsters and all this trash everywhere so that was a great harborage for the rats. Sometimes you see a lot of debris and tree limbs,” Brack said.

Many homes across the metro are still left with brush piles from the October ice storm. Conant said those piles are another safe haven for rats.

“It’s just another area for them to go hide, okay? That’s what that’s for,” Conant said. “When they pick it up, they’ll scatter, and then that’s when you get them in homes and businesses.”

Conant said rats carry dozens of diseases. He said the most common are salmonellosis and rat bite fever.

“(Rat bite fever) can be transferred also through the contaminated food and water, as well as bites and scratches,” Conant said.

He said getting bitten or scratched is unlikely, but not impossible.

“I think the risk is high because, like I said, you're coming into their home. You're coming into their area,” Conant said. “So, for them to get bit it's kind of hard to determine the likelihood of them getting to bit, but it's definitely there.”

With the possibility of rats living in brush piles, Conant said homeowners should be vigilant.

“They’re generally going to find a way in no matter what. You know? It does help when you don't have things against the house. You know, like the branches being out there against in the yard doesn't help,” Conant said.

The first thing residents should look out for is rat droppings.

“If you can eliminate clutter, that's a good thing. If you can seal things, that's a good thing,” Conant said.

Brack said when they get a complaint, they City-County Health Department will send a team to the location reported to look for a source.

“A lot of the complaints (we get) would be possible harborage for rodents. That could be, trash, junk, debris that's outside. Flooding like sewer backup, possibly,” Brack said. “Those are more of our environmental complaints and we do, we do get a lot. Sometimes we do absorb the rats, other times we don't. We've had some people before who are feeding the rats and just drawing them in. Then we get on the food side, we get different complaints where maybe there are mice inside the restaurant or cockroaches and stuff like that.”

If there is an infestation, Brack said it could be a public health issue.

“A rat or mouse can fit through a hole that's the size of a dime,” Brack said.

During the city’s investigation off N. Penn Ave., Brack explained the potential threat to nearby restaurants.

“If you look at some restaurant back doors, they may have little cracks in the back of their doors. If you've got this area where the mice are saying, ‘Oh there's food here,’ they're going to keep coming back to that. They're going to end up in the restaurants or in the places of business and create more havoc.”

Since our investigation, the Oklahoma City-County Health Department ordered nearby restaurants off 10th Street and N. Pennsylvania Ave to empty its dumpsters twice a week in hopes to begin to eliminate the problem.

“We really rely on the community to alert us to things like this because our specialty is in restaurants, the environmental side. We have a really large county and there's, you know, just a couple inspectors who go out and work, specifically the environmental complaints, so go into our website occhd.org and putting in a complaint if you see something in out in the community that could be hazardous to the public's health,” Brack said. “We thank people when they put in complaints because we only have so many people and so many eyes everywhere. We need the help of the community as well.”