



RODENTS IN HEALTH CARE AND LONG-TERM CARE SETTINGS



Health care and long-term care professionals must take various precautionary measures to ensure their facilities meet proper sanitation regulations and keep sensitive populations in good health. When a mouse or rat infestation occurs, however, bacteria can spread and contaminate living areas, surfaces, medical supplies, surgical equipment and more, which may ultimately pose serious health threats to those residing and working in the facility. Not only does this create a dangerous workplace and living environment, but it can also wreak havoc on the reputation of a care setting if the problem becomes publicly known.

The following information can be used to educate professionals in health care and long-term care working environments about the common signs of a rodent problem and potential health risks associated with an infestation.

How rodents enter health care and long-term care facilities

Rodents will invade facilities through any open avenue, whether it's the front entrance or a small crack or crevice in the foundation of the building. Derek Cowan, branch manager at Abell Pest Control, explained the various entryways mice or rats may use to get into a building.

"Pests are curious," he said. "They're going to be searching around the exterior of the building, looking for small potential openings which can be cracks and crevices around the outside of the facility, any type of entry point around utilities, such as lines to the gas or air conditioning or poor weather stripping around the structure. They'll take advantage of any small type of entry point that they could possibly get into. Even the simple act of people leaving the door open during the summertime to let the air in allows pests entry."

Once rodents gain access to the facility, they'll consider the space led through any small crack or crevice home and begin to procreate. It's important to remember that an issue that involves only a few mice can turn into a bigger, more devastating concern within days, since rodent populations multiply quickly – especially when food and shelter is at their disposal. Health care setting staff workers must remain aware and stay vigilant to keep a small infestation from turning into a larger problem.

Common signs of an infestation and what's causing the problem

Pests have a tendency to hide when it's least convenient for you. To verify you have a rodent problem, look out for the following signs of an infestation:

- Rodent droppings and urine in drawers or cupboards and near food packages and water sources.
- Nesting material, such as shredded paper or fabric, in small spaces.
- Gnaw marks on food packaging.
- Holes in the walls and floor boards.
- Stale smells coming from closed-off spaces, as well as noticeable smells of urine and feces throughout the facility.
- Grey rub marks from oil and dirt that comes off of pest fur after they travel through small openings.

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Cowan stated that strange noises coming from the walls and ceilings could be another clear sign of a problem. Also, keep your eyes on the floor when turning on the lights at the beginning of the workday.

"You might even see the rodent, running from point A to point B as it scurries from the lights getting turned on first thing in the morning as they're trying to get back into their hiding spots," said Cowan.

What's keeping rodents around your facility?

Access to food, excess garbage and water sources are the main factors attracting rodents and keeping them around.

"If there's food and garbage for them, and there's no other pest pressure – other types of animals there hunting it down – it makes it ideal for them to take over the facility without wanting to leave. They have everything they need: food, shelter and garbage," said Cowan.

Neglecting to take care of broken doors, air drafts and wall holes in the foundation of the facility can encourage rodents to claim the space. Additionally, forgetting to handle food spills and poor sanitation conditions could be what's keeping pest around. Spills in garbage containers inside or outside of the facility will attract rodents, making it critical for cleaning staff to remove spills and messes on a daily basis.

Health risks associated with having a rodent infestation

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, rats and mice spread over 35 different diseases worldwide, some of which include:

- Plague
- Rat bite fever
- Hantavirus
- Leptospirosis

These diseases can spread to humans through direct contact with the rodent, feces, urine or saliva. They can also be spread indirectly, through insects that have fed on an infected rodent, such as ticks, mites or fleas. In a health care and long-term care setting, most diseases are transmitted from eating food or drinking water contaminated with rodent urine or feces. This makes it critical for professionals to take precautionary measures at the first sign of an infestation.

When considering rodent infestations, it is important to remember that they move in a three-dimensional world.

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Never underestimate rodents

If the problem is left untreated, rodents may find their way into attics, storage closets and walls and gnaw at wires, which could present a potential fire hazard.

The biggest risk of all is underestimating the initial issue, according to Cowan.

"The risk of underestimating the degree of the problem is huge," he said. "If there's one or two mice, you can probably take care of it with a trap or two. But a lot of people underestimate the size of the population, which can grow quickly if left unchecked. If you think there are two or three mice, there are probably 20 or 30."

Avoid the devastating effects of infestation

A rodent infestation, regardless of its size, can be devastating to a health care and long-term care facility. Identifying the problem by determining the evidence, addressing pest entry points and taking preventative measures seriously can help combat the issue and ensure it doesn't happen again. This will give staff members, sensitive residents and their family members peace of mind, and can ultimately assist your facility in gaining back its positive reputation.

Abell Pest Control is one North America's leading professional pest management companies. White Papers are supplied by Abell's national Quality Assurance team.

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Sources

Client interview and notes

<https://www.epa.gov/rodenticides/identify-and-prevent-rodent-infestations>

<https://www.cdc.gov/rodents/index.html>

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