

IN-DEPTH GUIDE

Mice and rats: the complete homeowner's guide

Everything a homeowner needs in one place, based on public guidance from the U.S. EPA and CDC, with links to every source.

PestGuardCo.com · To reach an independent local pest control company, call (855) 424-9709.

> Plain-language summary of public guidance from the U.S. EPA and CDC · Updated November 2026

Check these first

1. **Look for droppings** in drawers, under the sink, behind the stove and along walls. Mouse droppings are rice-sized; rat droppings are closer to a raisin.

2. **Check food** in the pantry for chewed corners on boxes and bags.

3. **Listen at night** for scratching or running in walls, ceilings and the attic.

4. **Look for gaps** around pipes under sinks, behind appliances, at the garage door and where cables enter the house.

5. **Note greasy rub marks** along baseboards and paths behind furniture. Rodents travel the same routes every night.

6. **Smell for a musty, stale odor** in closed cabinets, the basement or the attic.

If you see this, it usually means...

IF YOU SEE

Fresh, dark, soft droppings

IT USUALLY MEANS

Active mice or rats right now

NEXT STEP

Clean up with the wet method below, then watch the same spot for new droppings.

IF YOU SEE

Old, gray, crumbly droppings only

IT USUALLY MEANS

Activity in the past

NEXT STEP

Clean up, seal gaps, and check again in a few days.

IF YOU SEE

Scratching in the walls at night

IT USUALLY MEANS

Mice or rats nesting inside walls

NEXT STEP

Note where and when you hear it; it helps whoever traps or seals.

IF YOU SEE

Heavy running in the attic

IT USUALLY MEANS

Often rats, which are larger and louder

NEXT STEP

Look outside for gaps at the roofline and around vents.

IF YOU SEE

Chewed wires or insulation

IT USUALLY MEANS

Rodents nesting near wiring

NEXT STEP

Have it looked at soon. Chewed wiring is a fire risk.

How to tell what you have

House mouse

Small, about 2.5–4 in. body, large ears, droppings like rice grains.

CDC notes mice can squeeze through a hole the size of a nickel. Often in kitchens, drawers and walls.

vs

Rat

Larger, about 7–10 in. body, thicker tail, droppings like raisins.

Rats can squeeze through a hole about the size of a half dollar. Often in attics, garages, basements and outside burrows.

SIZE

Mice 2.5–4 in. body; rats 7–10 in.

COLOR

Gray to brown

WHERE

Kitchens, attics, basements, garages

WHEN

All year, peak in fall and winter

Mice or rats? How to tell

House mice are small and light, with large ears and droppings about the size of a grain of rice. Rats are larger and heavier, with droppings closer to a raisin. Mice explore widely and nibble a little everywhere; rats are more cautious and tend to stay on set routes.

Where you find signs matters too. Kitchens, drawers and pantry shelves point to mice. Attics, garages, basements and burrows along the foundation are more typical of rats.

Finding how they get in

The CDC notes that rodents get in through gaps between the foundation and the ground, around attic and crawl space vents, and around holes for electrical, plumbing, cable and gas lines.

Walk the outside of the house slowly, checking the bottom of the walls and around the garage door. Then check inside under sinks, behind the stove and refrigerator, and in closets on outside walls.

Seal up, trap up, clean up

CDC guidance boils it down to three steps. Seal up gaps so rodents can't get in, using steel wool with caulk or spray foam for small holes and metal sheeting or cement for larger ones.

Trap up to reduce the ones already inside, with snap traps placed along walls. And clean up food sources and nesting spots so the house is less inviting. The order matters: trap first, then seal, so rodents aren't trapped inside the walls.

Cleaning up safely

Air out the room for 30 minutes first if you can. Wear rubber or plastic gloves. Spray droppings, urine spots and nests with disinfectant or a bleach-and-water mix until very wet and let it soak 5 minutes.

Wipe it up with paper towels, put everything in a bag, then mop or wipe the whole area with disinfectant. Wash gloved hands, take the gloves off, then wash your hands with soap and warm water. Never sweep or vacuum droppings dry.

When baits are used

EPA guidance is that rodent baits should be in tamper-resistant bait stations made of durable plastic or metal, placed where children and pets cannot touch them. Many pest control companies use locked stations outdoors and traps indoors.

If you use any product yourself, read and follow the label. Using more than the label says doesn't work better and adds risk.

What to do and what to avoid

Do

- Put food in hard plastic, glass or metal containers with tight lids, including pet food.
- Clean crumbs and spills, and keep trash in a can with a tight lid.
- Set snap traps along walls where you've seen droppings, with the trigger end touching the wall.
- Fill small gaps with steel wool and seal around it with caulk.
- Keep firewood, debris and thick plants away from the walls of the house.

Avoid

- ✕ Don't sweep or vacuum droppings dry. It can stir dust and germs into the air.
- ✕ Don't put loose bait where kids or pets can reach it. Bait belongs in a locked, tamper-resistant station.
- ✕ Don't seal gaps while rodents may still be inside the walls.
- ✕ Don't handle rodents or nests with bare hands.

Health and safety

- Rodents can carry germs in their urine, droppings and saliva. Some can cause serious illness, such as hantavirus.
- The CDC's clean-up method: wear rubber or plastic gloves, spray droppings with disinfectant or a bleach-and-water mix until soaked, wait 5 minutes, wipe up with paper towels, bag it, then disinfect the area and wash your hands.
- Rodent allergens can also trigger asthma in some people.

Prevention checklist

- Seal gaps around pipes, vents, cables and the foundation.
- Add door sweeps, especially on garage and basement doors.
- Store food, birdseed and pet food in sealed containers.
- Keep grass short and shrubs trimmed back from the house.
- Store firewood off the ground and away from the walls.
- Fix leaks; rodents need water too.

When to call a pro

Call a pro if you see droppings again after cleaning, hear activity in walls or the attic, find chewed wiring, or see rats.

1

Inspection

Inside and out: droppings, rub marks, nests, and every gap they could be using.

2

Trapping or baiting

Traps or locked bait stations placed where kids and pets can't reach them.

3

Exclusion

Sealing entry points once activity stops, so new rodents can't get in.

4

Follow-up

Return visits to check traps, remove catches and confirm activity has stopped.

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Questions

How do I know if mice are still active?

Clean up all droppings, then check the same spots over the next few days. New droppings, fresh gnaw marks or noises at night mean they're still there.

Do mice go away on their own?

Rarely. They stay as long as they find food, water and shelter. Trapping plus sealing the gaps is what stops them.

Is it safe to clean droppings myself?

For small amounts, yes, using the CDC's wet method with gloves and disinfectant. Don't sweep or vacuum them dry. For heavy infestations or nests in hard-to-reach spaces, a pro is the safer choice.

Why do I hear them at night only?

Mice and rats are mostly active at night, which is when they travel between nests and food.

Sources

Rodent Control (https://www.cdc.gov/healthy-pets/rodent-control/index.html) **CDC**

How to Seal Up to Prevent Rodents (https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/pets/wildlife/seal-up.html) **CDC**

How to Clean Up After Rodents (https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/pets/wildlife/clean-up.html) **CDC**

Preventing Pests at Home (fact sheet, PDF) (https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2014-01/documents/preventpest.pdf) **U.S. EPA**

Do's and Don'ts of Pest Control (https://www.epa.gov/safepestcontrol/dos-and-donts-pest-control) **U.S. EPA**

This guide is PestGuard's own plain-language summary of public guidance from U.S. government agencies (EPA and CDC). U.S. federal government publications are generally in the public domain; follow the links to read the originals. It is general information, not an official government publication and not a substitute for an inspection. If you use any pest control product, read and follow the label. In an emergency, call 911. For pesticide questions, the National Pesticide Information Center can help: 1-800-858-7378.