



## ISLAND COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

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### *HEALTH INFORMATION BULLETIN (HIB)*

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**HIB #104**

## **RATS**

### **Topics covered in this HIB:**

- General information about Rats
- What diseases do rats carry?
- How can I tell if I have rats?
- How do I eliminate rats?

### **General information about Rats**

Island County is home to two types of rats: Norway rat and Roof rat. The Norway rat (aka. sewer rat or brown rat), which lives in burrows, garages, walls and bushes, averages 7 to 10 inches in length (not including the tail) and has strong feet with four claw-like nails that enable it to run and climb with squirrel-like agility. It is an excellent swimmer, surviving in rivers and bays, in sewer streams and toilet bowls. The Roof rat is very dark grey, almost black, and averages 6 to 8.5 inches and prefers attic spaces and trees.

The gestation period for a pregnant female rat is twenty-one days, and the average litter is between eight to ten pups. A female rat can become pregnant again immediately after giving birth. If there is a healthy amount of garbage for the rats to eat, then a female rat will produce up to twelve litters of twenty rats each year. One rats' nest can turn into a rat colony of fifty rats in six months. One pair of rats has the potential to create 15, 000 descendants in a year! So it is important to address a rat problem as soon as you identify it.

### **What diseases do rats carry?**

Rats are carriers of bacteria, viruses, protozoa, and fungi; they carry mites fleas, lice, and ticks. Rats can spread diseases such as rat bite fever, the rat-urine ailment leptospirosis, trichinosis, tularemia, salmonellosis, murinetyphus fever and bubonic plague. These can be spread to people who come in contact with infected rats or their nesting materials.

## **How can I tell if I have rats?**

Rats are nocturnal, and therefore you may not notice them during the daytime hours. A good sign that there are a lot of rats around is if you do see one in the daylight. Population pressures force them out during the day to search for food. If you suspect rats, but have not yet seen one you can check the following for signs: droppings (look for large black rice-shaped droppings behind objects, near walls and in places seldom cleaned or disturbed), tracks (examine dusty places for rat tracks), smears (look for darkened areas along walls adjacent to pipes, beams, and openings where rats travel), gnawing (look for signs around doors, windows, utility lines, and packaged goods, especially in food storage areas), burrows (holes and fresh diggings near foundations, under floors, sidewalks, platforms, embankments), test baiting (place food where rats can find it and observe results).

## **How do I eliminate rats?**

Since rats move from one place to another, control is the responsibility of everyone. Community action is essential in longtime control of these rodents. Rats are attracted by trash piles, open garbage cans, and rubbish heaps. To keep rats out of your home you must eliminate the sources of food (garbage, bird feed and dog food are some rat favorites), remove shelter, rat-proof your home, and remove any existing rats that have already nested in or around your home.

Rats will generally live within sixty-five feet of their food source. If you do not want rats living near your home, keep all garbage and refuse in tightly covered rodent-proof containers, store food in rat-proof buildings, rooms, or containers, get rid of bird or squirrel feeders, and do not keep pet food outside where it might be accessible to rats. Rats require one half ounce to one ounce of water a day to survive. Pour out any water source that may be collecting around your home. This includes birdbaths, old tires or any containers that may collect water.

Rats' skeletons collapse and they can squeeze into a hole as small as three quarters of an inch wide, the average width of their skull. It is important to close necessary openings such as windows, doors and ventilators with ¼ inch wire mesh (hardware cloth). Close unnecessary openings in your home with concrete or sheet metal. Do not pile coal, wood, etc. near or against walls. This provides a good living environment for rats to nest. Keep stacked firewood at least 12 to 18 inches off the ground. Cut down black berry bushes, which is another favorite home for rats.

There are two methods for eliminating rats: traps or poisons. Rodent control supplies can usually be obtained at local stores. Rodent poisons are sold under various trade names, with the active ingredient given on the label. The pest-control industry offers

professional service in rat control. Elimination, rat proofing, and advice on sanitation can be obtained from your local pest-control operator or exterminator.

One option is using rat poisons. Do not use poisons inside the house unless monitored by a qualified pest control technician. Bait stations are recommended to protect other animals or children from accessing it. This also increases its attractiveness, as rats prefer to eat in secure places. Anticoagulant poisons prevent normal clotting of the blood and cause rats to die by internal bleeding. A continuous supply of fresh bait should be made available for at least 10 days, or longer if rats are still feeding in it. Use caution when using poisons to prevent contamination with food, and reduce risk of harm to other animals and children.

Trapping rats is another option. Spring snap traps are the best and cheapest traps to use. They should be placed in areas traveled by rats (along baseboards, corners, etc.). Use plenty of traps so that the rats may be trapped before they recognize and start to avoid them. If bait is required, use peanut butter, raisins, or gumdrops on the trigger.

### **Glossary of Terms:**

**Rat burrow** – holes in dirt where rats travel and or nest.

**Nocturnal** - active at night

**Anticoagulant poisons** - a substance that hinders the clotting of blood

### **Other Informational Resources**

- <http://www.islandcounty.net/health>

*NOTE:* The information presented within this Health Information Bulletin (HIB) is provided to assist with the clarification of a detailed and complex process generally involving rules and regulations. The information contained in this HIB may not provide a complete description of all the required elements of a permit process; therefore, it is always recommended that an applicant review the pertinent regulation or discuss their plans with a Health Department representative.

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