

Don't Let Rodents Gnaw Into Your Bottom Line

It's that time of year again — temperatures are dropping, and patrons are hurrying inside for a warm seat and a hot meal. Unfortunately, cooler temperatures mean rats and mice will also be seeking shelter from the cold, and many will try to find it in your restaurant.

According to Frank Meek, technical director for Orkin Inc., rodents are familiar pests in foodservice environments because their three basic needs — water, food and shelter — can all be met in a restaurant setting. Rodents, like humans, want to be comfortable. So when the weather gets colder, they want a warm haven. Meek says rodents will eat most of the same foods that people do. “Your restaurant can be just as appealing to a Norway rat as it is to your customers — and with none of the marketing.”

Of course, you do not want a rodent infestation in your restaurant for a number of reasons. Rodents are a sure sign of unsanitary conditions to health inspectors and can cause an immediate shutdown, during which time you're losing valuable revenue and reputation. And if a customer sees a rodent, look out. The resulting scene can mean lost customers, a spot on the evening news or even a lawsuit.

But Meek says those may be the least of your problems. If you're fortunate enough to avoid a run-in with customers or inspectors, rodents still threaten food safety and can cause expensive property damage by burrowing through walls and gnawing through electrical wiring.

To make sure rodents don't become a problem in your restaurant, take action before you have a problem — prevention is much less costly than dealing with an infestation.

The best way to prevent rodents from infesting your facility is to thwart their efforts to enter the building in the first place. Meek suggests you work with a pest management professional to put in place the following prevention measures and stop rodents in their tracks:

Keep the interior and exterior of the facility as clean as possible. Excess food debris offers rodents an attractive and easily accessible food source that will keep them coming back. Odors are a powerful attractant as well. Dumpsters should be routinely cleaned and rotated, and outside trash cans need to be covered tightly to protect them from scavenging rodents.

Eliminate excess water or moisture in and around the facility. While mice can absorb enough moisture from their food, rats need a water source to survive. Eradicating these water sources will reduce the probability of a rat infestation, in addition to other pest problems.

Make sure all doors and windows shut properly. Mice can squeeze through openings the width of a dime, and rats only need a space the size of a quarter to enter.

Trim all vegetation back two to three feet from the side of the building. If feasible, consider installing a 30-inch-wide gravel strip around the restaurant's exterior. Rodents avoid being out in the open, and this exposed buffer can prevent them from venturing too close to the building.

When needed, place tamper-resistant bait stations around the exterior of the building. Inquisitive rodents will eat the poisonous bait and die. All bait stations should be documented and closely monitored to track rodent activity.

Most importantly, make sure that your prevention program is thoroughly documented. Detailed and comprehensive documentation of all pest control work completed in your establishment, including rodent and bait station activity, corrective action plans, and other preventive measures, will be useful to health inspectors and can increase your inspection scores.

“Whether or not rodents have invaded your establishment, consider asking a pest management professional for a rodent control consultation,” Meek says. “Most reputable providers will offer this service at no charge. Taking steps now to prevent a problem is the best way to keep rats and mice from gnawing into your bottom line.”

“I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.”

— Thomas A. Edison