

Ask an Expert: The House Mouse – Not Your Storybook Christmas Mouse

Terry Messmer

11/12/2021



“Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.” The opening line of Charles Moore’s poem creates the impression of slumbering mice awaiting the arrival of Santa. In Anne Mortimer’s book, “The Christmas Mouse,” she tells of a mouse full of festive energy. This portrayal is likely the most accurate, as mice are most busy and active at night.

In recent weeks, many homeowners have reported seeing mice droppings in cupboards, basements, food storage areas, bathrooms, bedrooms and garages. Mice can spread diseases through their urine, droppings, saliva and nesting materials. These diseases can be deadly, and if you have a major infestation in your home, the risk factor increases. The mice most frequently encountered in our areas are the house mouse and the deer mouse.

Mice are generally found living far away from humans, but the onset of cold weather encourages them to seek warmth in homes and structures.

Mice are nibblers. They feed on a wide range of food, but prefer foods high in fats and sugars. They get most of the water they need from food. They also eat, urinate and defecate continually and tend to nest near their food.

It might sound a bit dramatic to say that a mouse can burn down your house, but they can, and it’s especially true at Christmas with lights and wires. Mice will nibble on wires when they are in walls and attics or as they

try to gain access to places the wires may be blocking. Once a wire becomes bare, the chance of it sparking a fire increases. About 25 percent of all fires attributed to “unknown causes” in the U.S. are started by rodents.

Because they are most active at night, mice often roam undetected throughout a household. If you start seeing them around in the daytime, you likely have a mouse infestation. Droppings and the musky smell of urine coming from cupboards or drawers is also a sign.

Mice have a very high reproductive rate. Within a matter of months, a female can produce several litters. These litters can also start producing mice within 2 months of birth.

The best way to control mice in your house is prevention. Consider these tips.

- Mice can fit through tiny spaces. Holes and cracks in the foundation and outer walls are entry points, as are doorways and areas around windows, chimneys, roof vents, pipes and wires that enter your home. Seal all holes and openings larger than one-quarter inch. Use heavy materials such as concrete mortar, sheet metal or heavy-gauge hardware cloth. Caulk around doors, windows and places that wires and pipes enter. Check roof and roof vents for damage or holes, and repair as needed. Keep gutters clean. Clear away wood, leaves or other debris near your foundation walls.
- Inside your home, store dry goods (including cat and dog food) in hard plastic or glass containers with a tightly sealed lid. This will ensure that your food does not get contaminated. Take the garbage out frequently, and don’t leave open foods out.
- Store bulk foods in rodent-proof containers. Make sure spilled food and crumbs are cleaned up. A Christmas cookie or piece of fruitcake that ended up between the couch cushions can feed a mouse for a week.

If you do have a mouse in the house, consider these tips for catching and removal.

- Mice can usually be caught using wooden snap traps. Because they have poor eyesight but excellent senses of touch and smell, they tend to travel close to walls and other objects. Plan on setting at least six traps per mouse seen, and place traps close to walls. Use fresh bait, such as peanut butter. You may want to bait the traps without setting them for a day or so. When you notice the bait has been taken, set the trap. Once caught, mice should be bagged

and disposed of in an outside garbage container or buried.

- Do not use rodenticides to control mice in homes. Mice that feed on poison baits may die in the home. As they start to decay, the resulting odor will cause further issues.
- Due to the risk of disease associated with mice, cleaning up their nests or places where

they have defecated and urinated is a process that should not be taken lightly. Do not vacuum or sweep mouse droppings, as it can release more bacteria into the air, and the dust can make you ill. Always wear a mask and latex or vinyl gloves while cleaning mouse-infected areas.

- Spray the area with a commercial disinfectant or mixture of bleach and water and let it sit for five minutes before using paper towels to wipe the area clean. Once you are done, put the dirty paper towels in a plastic bag in your outside garbage.
- Food items that have been chewed, like that Christmas cookie or fruitcake, should be immediately discarded.

More information can be found at wildawareutah.org.

By: Terry Messmer, Utah State University Extension wildlife specialist, terry.messmer@usu.edu, 435-797-3975