HARVARD
Campus Services
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH & SAFETY

Mice FAQS

The sighting of a mouse at home or in your workplace can be upsetting. We offer insights that are meant to help dispel myths, calm fears and guide your responses.

Why are there mice inside the building?

Mice are common denizens indoors and outdoors. These rodents are naturally curious and impressively adept creatures that investigate their environment in search of food, comfortable nesting sites and other mice. They frequent nearly all buildings in Cambridge, Boston and elsewhere. They can squeeze through a hole the width of a standard wooden pencil, gnaw through wood and plaster, and they are able to climb and jump like little acrobats. They enter rooms because they can, and often because they detect the odors of food and other mice. Food and candy stored in backpacks, desk drawers, open bowls, and elsewhere are highly attractive to mice. Similarly attractive are food packages (even ones still sealed) and food wastes / residues in trash. Mice will steal food and candy and cache these items in wall voids, within and behind furniture, above ceilings and even within hollow office partition walls. Once mice have located food and places to hide, they have no reason to leave. Mice also readily find each other, and then breed like… well… mice.

We never had mice before, why do we have them now?

Generations of students, faculty and staff members have encountered the occasional mouse in their respective work and residential areas. Whereas few persons would opt to see or share dwellings with a mouse, this occurrence really isn't anything new. Many notable Harvard alumni certainly experienced and survived encounters with mice. Although such events may not have been desired, the experiences may quite possibly have had positive influences on the graduate's career and perspectives in appreciating nature and in responding to life's little challenges.

Are the rodents I see mice or rats?

Whereas these creatures are confident of their identity, people are often confused by what they observe. The Boston / Cambridge area is home to two kinds of mice and one kind of rat. Mice within urban buildings are almost invariably of the 'house mouse' variety. These readily invade and thrive in our homes and offices where they find warmth, food, shelter and other mice. They don't seem nearly as comfortable or abundant outdoors. In contrast, mice outside, particularly in more suburban and rural areas, tend to be the 'white-footed mouse'. These are most 'at home' outside, but some do invade dwellings in autumn to find shelter.

Adult rats are huge in comparison to mice, but a young rat can – at a distance – easily be mistaken (by persons) to be an adult mouse. The names afforded to these beasts in different languages further confuses the conversation. For instance, in Spanish, 'el ratón' translates to 'mouse', and 'la rata' refers

to 'rat'. The beasts, of course, don't care what you call them, as long as you don't call them late for dinner.

Should you see a **mouse** indoors, contact your building manager. If you observe a **rat** indoors, please reach out the Harvard Operations Center. See a rat outside? Unfortunately, that's a common occurrence. Report your observations to the building manager who will then alert our Environmental Public Health team so we can investigate.

How do mice get into the building?

Mice wander inside while a building is under construction, and yet others enter whenever the opportunity presents. A propped open door and an open window are invitations for diverse creatures to enter and explore. Mice may also wander in via penetrations around pipes and wires or through other holes they find or create. Occasionally, mice enter as stowaways within boxes or other belongings transported into the building. Regardless of their means of entry, they have no reason to leave if they find food, shelter and other mice.

What does Harvard do to control the mice?

Personnel of the Environmental Public Health program within the Department of Environmental Health and Safety (EH&S) oversee a modern and proactive integrated pest management (IPM) program across our campuses. EH&S devises, adopts and pursues programs aimed to exclude pests from our buildings, and to contain and suppress any pests that manage to enter. Our IPM efforts focus on sustainable engineering modifications in new construction and during renovations, and on operational (behavioral) management to reduce opportunities that would attract and foster pests. We also oversee the activities of the Harvard-qualified pest control vendors on campus and support their efforts to monitor and suppress pests by methods that are as humane, efficacious, environmentally acceptable and practical as possible. EH&S responds to concerns and complaints by Harvard faculty, personnel and students, and guides appropriate abatement efforts. So, if you see or know of a problem, please do reach out to your building manager or to EH&S.

There are traps around, why don't they work?

The pest control personnel deploy traps in strategic locations as means to monitor and capture mice and other pests. Many of these traps are baited with an attractant (one of many kinds of food odors), and the traps are inspected and serviced periodically. Just as water flows downhill and electricity follows the path of least resistance, mice will approach foods and food odors as a function of the odor's composition and relative concentration. Hence, a mouse will more readily visit a drawer or backpack containing candy, or a trash can holding food waste or opened food bags, before it bothers with a tiny bit of attractant on a trap. Traps work most effectively when they provide the only or best source of the attractant. So, you can help drive mice to the traps by securing your food and by eliminating any food

wastes every day. Should you find a trapped mouse, please contact your building manager who will then request a visit by pest control or custodial personnel.

Mice now seem far worse since pest control personnel blocked holes and installed door sweeps. Why?

Mice that find themselves trapped in rooms become increasingly hungry as their paths to food and shelter are eliminated. Whereas mice normally venture about at night to seek food, their hunger pangs cause them to be bolder and risk being seen at midday. Similarly, in their desire to escape into wall voids, they may be heard scratching at the recently closed portals. Such sights and sounds cause many folks to mistakenly conclude that mice have become more numerous. Instead, this phenomenon is anticipated and normal. Hunger will more likely cause mice to gravitate to the attractant baits on traps where they should meet their demise. In essence, 'things seemingly get worse before they get better.' If there was a method to instantly offer you gratification (to safely and practically eliminate all mice as with a magic wand), you can be sure we'd adopt such a strategy. In the meantime, we encourage you to be patient and to help by denying food to pests.

I don't want to see traps or cause mice to suffer. Why can't we control mice without harming them?

We understand that the sight of a mouse, whether wandering freely about or caught in a trap, can be distressing. We do our best to limit such events, but we cannot eliminate them entirely. In some places our pest control vendors do, indeed, use 'live traps', but these are inefficient and not appropriate for most sites.

Why can't I just poison the mice?

Rodenticides (mouse poisons) can be effective, but sometimes the result is worse than folks imagine. Mice rarely will perish in obvious and accessible sites. A dead mouse hidden in a wall or elsewhere can be many orders of magnitude worse than a living mouse. Why? A mouse carcass will soon decompose and emit an odor that will permeate and linger for days or weeks throughout a much larger area.

As the mouse decomposes, its carcass will be detected by a 'clean-up crew' of certain kinds of flies, beetles, moths and other rodents. They'll soon help turn the carcass to dust, but this feast will give rise to another generation of pests. Once they've had their just desserts, the insects will disperse, and the wandering parade of pests will then inspire a sense of fascination – or abject concern – to human observers.

Rodenticides are also regulated by federal and state law, and their use on campus is further restricted by EH&S. These products can and do offer value in some places, but only rarely within an occupied building. Note that only state-licensed pest control applicators are authorized to deploy pesticides of any kind at

Harvard. Faculty, staff and students are prohibited from storing or using any pesticide on campus unless it is part of a research program authorized by the administration.

What can I do to reduce the problem?

Faculty, staff and students can and should take all opportunities to help maintain their residences and work sites in a manner that will not attract or support mice or other pests. Specifically, please help us help you by engaging in the following endeavors:

- Keep doors closed and ensure that any windows that are opened are protected with screens. Yes, mice can and do scramble up brick façades and enter open windows.
- Secure ALL of your food and candy in hard-sided metal, plastic or glass containers. Mice readily chew through bags and cardboard boxes.
- Wash dishes free of food and food residues unless you want mice to clean them for you.
- Empty trash of any food wrappers or wastes daily, and keep the trash container covered.
- Should you see a mouse or evidence of mice or other pests, alert your building manager!
- Exercise good housekeeping. Eliminate clutter on floors to deny mice places to hide.
- Do not feed wildlife on campus. It isn't good for the wildlife or for people.
- Don't spend your own money on your own traps. Harvard pays a pest management vendor to deploy and service traps at no cost to you.
- Don't purchase or use 'ultrasonic pest repellent devices', as the claims that they repel mice are not scientifically supported.

I'm afraid of mice. Won't they bite me or give me diseases?

Mice would rarely willingly bite a person. Almost invariably, such a bite would be defensive and result from mishandling a mouse. Mice sometimes carry their own little pests and parasites, and some of these can be of public health significance. Hence, we pursue practical and sometimes intensive efforts to minimize risks. You should discard any food that has been soiled or contaminated by mice. Other items that have become fouled from mouse excreta should be cleaned appropriately. Contact us at EH&S for specific guidance.

Can't I just get a cat?

Great question! Cats are (usually) adept predators of mice, and have been actively encouraged to protect homes, farms, food storage areas (and even libraries and museums) against mice and other rodents. But, is a cat an approved or appropriate 'tool' to help mitigate pests? The answer depends on who you ask. Whereas cats would undoubtedly support the idea, the decision is really up to the residents and building manager. Some Harvard buildings allow pets, but many do not. The building manager will guide you as to what is permitted or prohibited, as well as the requirements if you were to host a cat. Some folks would opt for mice rather than a cat.

I heard about mouse-detection dogs. What's that all about?

Yes, there are some specially-bred, trained and handled dogs to detect mice. These dogs follow their sensitive noses and ears to locate where mice are hiding, traveling and nesting. At best, the dogs may locate and identify otherwise hidden sites where mice frequent, but they neither will chase nor catch a mouse. Personnel from the Harvard-qualified pest control vendors and EH&S are quite adept at searching for mice and instituting relevant interventions, and should be relied upon for this expertise.

The mice are causing me great stress and loss of sleep. What else can be done to help me?

Sharing your home or workplace with unwanted guests can contribute to an already stressful life. Resources are available to help manage stress, regardless of the cause. Students are encouraged to reach out for help to their residential and/or faculty advisors and building managers, as well as to the HUHS Center for Wellness and Health Promotion. Staff members can obtain assistance through the Employee Assistance Program.

We hope this information is of interest and value to you. Please don't hesitate to contact your building manager or EH&S should you have further questions or concerns. We're here to help.

Philosophical Musings

Whilst we earnestly work hard to keep wildlife wild (and out of our buildings), we invite you to ponder how others perceive mice. A few notable examples are provided for your viewing, listening and reading pleasure. Enjoy!

- Harvard graduate John Lithgow ('67) recites, as part of his keynote commencement address, his own descriptions of a mouse at Harvard: *Mahalia Mouse Goes to College*.
- Harvard Professors Steven Pinker and Tom C. Conley and Dean D. E. Lorraine Sterritt read '*If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*' by Laura Numeroff.
- Robert Burns: *Tae a Moose* (To a Mouse), as related by Dawn Steele. 20160620
- C.S. Lewis and his appreciation of mice: C.S. Lewis and his Mice
- Remy: Harvard's unofficial cat: https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/10/harvards-remy-is-more-than-a-humanities-cat/