



A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Protect My Food Storage From Rodents And Hantavirus?

Charlotte Brennand answers:*

One of the problems in storing food is that it can attract rodents. Rodents have been identified as carriers of hantavirus, so care needs to be taken when working in an area that shows signs of rodent infestation. If your storage area shows signs of mice droppings or nests:

- Wear protective clothing including latex or rubber gloves. Masks are desirable but inexpensive painters' masks are not effective and may give a false feeling of security. Masks need to have a HEPA or N-100 filter.
- If a closed area, let it air out for 30 minutes before beginning cleaning.
- DON'T SWEEP OR VACUUM DROPPINGS. This may spread the virus through the air.
- Thoroughly spray or soak any dead mice, traps, dropping or nests with a commercial disinfectant solution or a 10 percent solution of chlorine bleach. To make a 10 percent chlorine solution: mix 1 1/2 cups chlorine bleach in 1 gallon of water.
- Wipe shelves, counters and cabinets with disposable rags or paper towels soaked in the disinfectant. Mop floors using disinfectant solution.
- Double bag wastes and discard.
- Disinfect gloves or discard.
- Wash hands or shower.

Avoiding the problem is always the preferred method. This is not easy since the cartilage in rodents' heads allows them to go through very small holes. A mouse can get through a hole as small as 1/4 inch (size of pencil eraser) and rats can go through a 1/2 inch hole.

- Begin by critically evaluating the storage area. See if the end of a pencil will fit into cracks or gaps. Check for areas in cupboards, walls and floors where there are electric, gas or water pipes running through them. Is there a gap under the door?
- Seal cracks and holes with materials that are resistant to gnawing. These include concrete mortar, metal pieces, steel wool and screening.
- Package food defensively. Metal containers, glass bottles and heavy plastic containers with tight fitting lids are resistant to rodents. Paper boxes, plastic bags and cellophane packages or packages that do not close thoroughly are easily accessible to rodents. Sacks of flour and bags of grains need a better barrier.
- For simplicity, pasta products, rice, dry soup mixes, pudding mixes, etc. in their original packages can be placed in a rodent-proof package. This keeps the labels and cooking instructions with the products.

- If products such as rice, barley or other grains are transferred to plastic or glass containers, cut the cooking instructions from the label and place in the container with the food. Cracker boxes and large cereal packages also need protection and can be placed intact in larger safe packages.
- If food is transferred from the original container, be sure the new container is safe for food storage. Any container that originally held food can be reused for food if it has a tight-fitting lid. Empty coffee cans, mayonnaise jars, even plastic milk jugs can be cleaned and reused for products such as grains.

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