

The Billion Dollar Bite

Termites Chew Through Homes and Businesses

By Barry Murray

Every year, termites cause billions of dollars in damage, and Homeowner's Insurance will not cover the cost of treatment. While you sleep, termites may literally be eating you out of house, home and even your business.

Termite damage is insidious because you usually do not see them or the damage they cause until it's too late. They are known for their industriousness and they can find a way into your home, whether it is made of wood or concrete.

They can swarm in spring and fall, anytime environmental conditions are right. These invisible destroyers cause more damage in the U.S. than storms, fires and floods *combined*.

Additionally, immigrant termites from Africa and Asia invade each year, chewing through homes, office buildings and even historic sites. These termites are stowaways in plants, pallets and other materials being shipped internationally. Often, they simply infest a vessel, swarm and come to land.

These new species don't crossbreed, but live side-by-side with native termites, increasing the damage termites inflict in the United States.

The National Pest Control Association estimates that native and immigrant termites are responsible for \$2.5 to \$3 billion in damage every year.

The U.S. is home to many species of termites. The most common are the Subterranean and Drywood termites.

Most termites are **subterranean** and tunnel in the soil. The ability to tunnel allows them to find and feed on many pieces of wood. This mobility also allows them to create much bigger colonies than those of wood inhabiting species. A subterranean termite colony can have hundreds of thousands to several million members.

This silent invader is always in search for wood to feed their colonies. Left undetected, they will tirelessly attack a home, causing dangerous and costly structural damage.

Subterranean termites enjoy warmth and like to eat cellulose, a material found in all plant cells. This nourishment enables them to tunnel their way through solid wood such as your house timber.

The first attack is likely to be on the underground structure of your house. As a rule, they travel above ground for food (wood) and underground for moisture. A termite mud tunnel found between the soil and wood construction in your home is a sign of infestation. Termites feed on any structure containing wood, they also attack slab homes and can enter through cracks as small as 1/64th of an inch.

Soil inhabiting termites can also be problems for rangeland, tropical forestry and tropical agriculture.

An ongoing detection and prevention program is essential, because a colony can be established and growing for several years before swarms are visible. By that time, there could be thousands of dollars in damage.

Drywood termites can cause serious damage to houses and furniture. These termites are easier to spot because they produce fecal pellets.

If you have Drywood termites in your house you are likely to see the coarse sand-like pellets long before you discover the termites themselves. The Drywood termite not only eats the wood structure, but lives inside the wood structure. These insects will construct a virtual city within the wood, complete with galleries or tunnels to get around it. They can enter the home by flying in or being carried on previously infested wood, such as furniture or construction materials.

Each year they swarm as a way of starting new colonies. Attic and eave areas are prime targets for new colonies, along with windowsills, baseboards, beams and doorframes. Any exterior wood that can be bored into is a good place to look for a colony. They can even attack furniture, paper, cloth, wallboard or any other cellulose material.

Preventing termites is as important as exterminating them. Be certain to check for termite clues, even if you live in a stucco or CBS home. These structures are not immune to termites, even though there is no wood near the ground. Termites build mud tunnels that can extend 50 to 60 feet.

Termites can also enter a home through expansion joints in concrete slabs or where utilities enter the house.

A termite prevention program should include the following elements:

- A professional inspection done at least once a year because the potential damage is too great to rely on "do-it-yourself" methods.
- An ongoing preventive system including the newest sodium borate-based materials, which can be painted, sprayed, or spread onto the wood, or

injected into hollow spaces inside the walls of the home.

- Having your pest control professional establish an "early warning system" that detects termites in the soil before they reach the home itself. The newest systems establish bait stations around the perimeter of the home, to detect the approach of termites while they are still several feet away.
- Anytime termites are found within five feet of a structure, begin more aggressive control treatments.

Many homeowners are turned off by the prospect of tenting their homes to fumigate the termites with poisonous gasses. This treatment might not be necessary for some homeowners. The latest in non-toxic chemical control technology is a safe new way to control this problem. Not only is this much more convenient, it also provides long-lasting protection against future infestations, a feature that traditional fumigation cannot offer.

With vigilance and foresight, you can save yourself thousands of dollars and the heartbreak of seeing your home or business fall prey to termites. It's up to you.

Barry Murray, national spokesperson for Truly Nolen, has appeared in more than 500 television segments nationally as the "Jack Hanna of Bugs" and has nearly 15 years of experience in the pest control industry. Barry brings an informative as well as unique and entertaining perspective to consumers' pest problems in the 21st Century.