

Terrible Termite Trouble

Some basic home maintenance tips to prevent termite invasions

If you have ever had a termite problem in your home you will know that they are ugly, destructive and costly little creatures. Being in the construction and maintenance industries, termite damage is the single most problematic issue we see on a regular basis. Left untreated and unrepaired, termites can cause enormous structural damage to your property. This is why prevention is so important. In Queensland we have to be particularly diligent about checking for signs of termite damage and preventing termite infestations because the key to termite prevention is creating an environment which is *not* conducive to termite populations. Unfortunately for us, humidity and moisture are exactly what termites need to thrive, but by following a few simple home maintenance tips you will be creating an environment termites don't like, as well as taking away their food source (which is primarily timber and 'soft' building materials). So, keep reading and let's say... good riddance termites!

What does a termite invasion look like?

The best way to describe termites and the damage they cause is with one simple word – ugly. Termites, otherwise known as white ants, have a similar shape and appearance to an ant but with a white, translucent skin (gross!!!). The picture below shows termites at the adult and baby stages of development. Once termites choose to munch their way through your home there will be millions of the little critters, all too willing to continue breeding and eating.



Termite adults and nymphs in action.

The most important thing (other than preventing termites in the first place) is knowing what to look out for that might suggest you have a termite problem. Often, termite damage is not visible, particularly in the early stages of an infestation. However, a termite damaged structure will have a "hollow" sound when you tap on it because the termites have eaten away the core of the structure.

When the problem begins to worsen, and if it is in a visible area, you may see signs of termites such as areas of **rippling paint**. This is most common in walls, architraves, skirting boards, and window and door frames.



The bubbling/rippling paint along this window frame is a clear indicator of a termite problem.

Mud spotting or mud tunnels are another sign to look out for. These often look like dirt deposits, but are in fact termite droppings and residue from timbers and materials that have been chewed through.



The black arrows indicate termite droppings, which look like piles of mud or dirt.

Ok, so I have termites... now what?

If you have any concerns at all that you might be sharing your house with termites, the best thing to do is call a professional pest control/termite management company immediately. If the termite nest is found, it can be destroyed either physically or chemically. It is also important to be sure that there aren't other termites nearby so check trees, stumps, wood stockpiles and other potential problem sites within 80 metres of the house. Termite management can include a whole range of treatments from chemical dusts and baits, to the installation of physical barriers (if not already in place). Having a professional deal with the termites is the best way to ensure you do not have a recurring termite issue in the future.

Once the termites have been removed, it is time to start the rebuilding and repair process. It is vital that damaged timber frames and structures are replaced completely because termite damaged timber is extraordinarily brittle and can easily collapse and buckle. Termites are so costly and dangerous because they can ultimately compromise the entire structure and safety of your home.

Yuk! I don't EVER want termites... how do I prevent an invasion?

Considering the enormous amount of damage termites can cause, prevention is clearly much better than cure. There are lots of basic things you can do to discourage termites from munching on your home, but ultimately the best thing to do is arrange for regular inspections of your property. In a climate like ours, twice a year is ideal, particularly in the warmer seasons like early spring and late summer. Things you can do on a daily basis to deter termites vary, but generally they all help to make the environment in and around your home as termite-unfriendly as possible!

- Remove potential termite food (like wood) away from the house – don't leave timber stacks, old stumps, building scraps or garden sleepers up against the outside of your home.
- Since termites are attracted to water, be sure to fix leaking water pipes, drains, showers, sinks, air conditioning units etc... to prevent water build up.
- Termites also love humidity so keep air flowing under the house by improving sub-floor ventilation, drainage and access.
- Keep the edges of your house (slabs, foundations, piers and stumps) clear of any clutter, including garden beds and vegetation. Never spread mulch so that it touches the foundation of your home because this will allow termites to use the cover of the mulch to get access to your home undetected.
- Majority of homes (other than much older houses) have a termite barrier installed at the time of construction. Concrete paths, garden beds and any other additions to the perimeter of your home should be at least 70mm below the termite barrier. This allows for a visual inspection to be carried out of the termite barrier regularly.
- Termites can't chew through properly laid concrete, so make sure your concrete slab is properly designed, compacted and cured.
- Timber can be treated to prevent a termite attack, while other timbers are naturally more resistant to termites than others. When constructing your home, renovating or building extensions etc..., be sure to use timbers that are less conducive to termite invasions.

So the moral of the story when it comes to termites is... prevention, prevention, prevention and as usual... maintenance, maintenance, maintenance!

Sources:

- *Termidor – 'Termite Prevention Tips'*
- *NC State University – 'Residential, Structural and Community Pests'*
- *CSIRO – 'Termite or White Ant Treatment and Prevention'*

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