

Termite Infestations, Damage and Control

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Termite: worker

Subterranean termites are destructive wood-eating insects and cause homeowners frustration and expense when active nests are found in their houses. This can be especially troublesome when selling a

home because lending institutions (banks, savings and loans, FHA, VA) require houses certified to be termite free before lending money to home buyers. Presence of an old infestation or damage that has been treated does not require the home to be retreated. A Lincoln real estate agent estimated that about 10% of her house sales have required treatment after the discovery of an active termite nest in the house.

Because subterranean termites nest in the soil and need protection from the elements when they invade your house, they build mud tubes over exposed foundations and travel through these tubes to wooden structures in your house. The presence of these dried mud tubes is indication that you may have a termite infestation in your house. Because of the shorter distance from the ground to the wood framing, houses that are built on a concrete slab provide easier access for termites to enter the wooden structure.

Another sign of a termite infestation is when winged adults swarm in spring (mid-April in Nebraska) or fall, and flying termites are found inside the house. Swarming termites are dark brown, have two pairs of nearly equally sized wings and are weak flyers.

Wood damaged by termites may not be conspicuous because termite tunneling occurs inside the wood and a mere wooden shell may cover the damaged wood. Damaged wood can be penetrated

with a screwdriver or an ice pick, revealing mud tubes lining wood tunnels in an irregular pattern.

Places to inspect for termite activity are wooden constructions in basement and crawl space, wood sills, joists, support posts, basement window frames and wood under porches. Scrap wood on the ground or a woodpile next to the house should be removed as these potential feeding areas may allow termites easier access to your house. Termites may also be found in dead trees or wood stumps after a dead tree has been removed.

What should you do if you find termite activity? *Do not panic!* Termites damage wood slowly; it takes from 3-8 years for significant damage to result from a termite infestation in Nebraska, because our cold winter months reduce termite activity. Do-it-yourself termite control is possible using chlorpyrifos insecticide concentrate, but because of the difficulty of doing a thorough job and the risks associated with an improper treatment, we recommend professional treatment. Do not be pressured into making a quick decision about purchasing a termite control service. In making your decision, follow the following guidelines:

1. Deal with reliable firms. Ask for, and check references (i.e., previous clients that had termite treatment), and consult the Chamber of Commerce or Better Business Bureau. Be wary of fly-by-night termite control companies. Make sure the firm is insured with liability insurance.

2. Comparison shop. Get several inspections, opinions, and estimates. Treatment estimates may be highly variable and may differ by over \$1000 between the companies. What is important is not necessarily the total dollar figure, but what will be done for the

cost. It is important that you understand enough about the treatment so you can be sure to get the most for your money.

3. Get a written report detailing: 1) whether an active infestation is present, 2) where the infestation and damage is located, 3) what structures/areas will be treated and how, 4) what insecticide(s) and rates will be used, and 5) any warranty or limitations to the treatment. Read the proposals carefully. Use these reports to compare termite control companies. Also, be sure that you understand what your obligations after treatment might be.

What to do if your neighbor has termites? Or what if an inspection finds termites in a woodpile or dead tree in your yard? These are difficult questions for a naive homeowner to answer. It is also not easy to always get objective answers to these questions from termite control personnel because they are also in the business of selling termite control treatment. Just because your neighbor has termites, it doesn't mean that you do. And, in Nebraska, it is fairly common to find termites in firewood piles and old dead wood stumps. It is very important for homeowners to learn as much about the signs of termites and termite damage as they can to be able to make intelligent decisions about this potentially serious and expensive insect pest.

For more information about termites and termite control, refer to **NebGuide G91-1062, "Termites,"** and publication **EC 91-1556-B, "Subterranean Termites and Their Control."** In addition, fact sheets **11-95, "Termites Bite into Pocketbook"; 238-95, "Ten Termite FAQs"; 10-96, "When Termites Damage Your Home, What Are Your Options,"** may also be useful. All are available from the Lancaster Extension Office.