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## TERMITES – THE SCARY FACTS

### Termites

Many Australian homeowners quite rightly live in fear of termite infestations. A serious infestation can cause in major timber damage and result in huge repair costs. A frightening aspect of a subterranean termite infestation is that the termites often flourish undetected until costly damage has already occurred. You need to stop the termites before the damage gets out of hand.

Subterranean termites are widespread in most Australia, causing substantial structural damage in urban areas. Subterranean termites occur in large colonies that live underground and feed on available wood. Termites can enter a structure by tunnelling through wood or by building mud leads over or through cracks in foundation walls. If you suspect that you have termites, you should have an inspection conducted by qualified personnel.

#### THERE IS AN OLD BUT TRUE SAYING:

There are only 2 types of homes in Australia, "*those that have termites, and those that will get termites*", This is becoming a reality rather than a saying.

Termites and the termite swarm have been part of the Australian environment for millions of years. Also commonly known as white ants they are resilient and persistent, being found, on average, in every third Australian property.

Annually termites damage more than 180,000 Australian homes/buildings. Estimates of the combined cost of termite damage range from 700 to over 1 Billion dollars when agriculture and horticulture are taken into consideration.

Our growing love of landscaping in modern times, with the abundant use of bark, woodchips and mulch, timber retaining walls and pergolas has created a haven for termites in our back yards. This has hugely increased the presence of termites on residential properties, increasing the risk of damage to our biggest asset, our homes.

Termites are ground inhabiting (subterranean) social insects that live in colonies. A well established Termite colony can be made up of several million individuals. New termite colonies are formed when winged males and females from the parent colony emerge in flight and swarm (termite swarm). Every termite colony consists of 4 castes, each having a specific role within the colony's social structure; a termite swarm contains all the ingredients needed to begin a new colony.

## Termite Facts

- Australia is home to the most destructive termites in the world.
- One in every five homes in Australia has termite damage
- Over a period of a few months, termites can spread out over 100 metres
- A termite can lay up to 1,000 eggs per day
- Termite colonies can have as many as 7 million pests

Termites are sometimes referred to as 'white ants' because of their creamy colouring and ant-like appearance. There are over 350 species of termites in Australia of which some 20 species can damage timber in houses.

In nature termites assist in the recycling of organic matter and nutrients back to the soil.

Termites avoid light and rarely come out into the open. Often termites are found within timbers where they leave a wafer thin layer to protect themselves from the outside environment. Sometimes they conceal themselves within mud-like tubes or galleries.

### Termites in the home

Homes should have regular inspections of all accessible timber and potential termite entry points. Inspections should be carried out by a licensed pest controller who can identify timber problems and advise on individual solutions.

Local councils or licensed pest controllers should be able to advise on the frequency of inspections.

If termite damage is found in the home, don't panic. Do not disturb the termites by using household sprays or removing infested wood.

There is no immediate threat to the house, so take time to investigate the size and nature of the problem as well as all the available options.

At certain times of the year homeowners may notice winged termites in and around their house. This is the termites' annual flight from the nest.

This does not mean that there is a termite colony attacking the house. There may however be a nest nearby if there are large numbers of these termites.

## PREVENTING TERMITES

Termite prevention measures can be put in place during the construction of a new home, however for an older home that has no termite barrier in place, you can follow some simple tips.

**The aim is to discourage termites from foraging on your property by removing or raising above ground all potential food sources.**

- Do not store timber, refuse, firewood or similar materials against or close to your house or building. Remember, Termites love timber!
- Clean up any piles of branches or pieces of wood in your backyard.
- Remove all stumps and dead trees. Stumps and dead trees represent a huge food resource for termites.
- Do not use untreated bark chips in your garden or garden beds.
- Maintain a 75mm high clear area around the edge of your home to allow visual inspection of possible termite activity up the side of your foundation concrete slab.

- Rake garden beds away from your home to expose weep holes.
- Replace wooden lawn ornaments with non-wood items.
- Raise fence posts, deck posts and stair stringers onto concrete or use an alternative to wood for building.
- Ensure that wooden sheds are raised above ground.
- Fix any leaking plumbing, leaks or wet areas - termites thrive where there is moisture.
- Regularly inspect the perimeter of your home for signs of termite damage or evidence of access up from the ground and into your home

## SIGNS OF TERMITE ACTIVITY

### Early Signs of Termites

Evidence of subterranean termites may be one or more of the following:

- A sagging door or floor, a warped wall, a hollow sounding beam.
- Discoloured or blistering paint, depressions in wood, moisture collecting in unusual places, springy floors or steps
- Mud shelter tubes (light / dark brown in colour - clay like texture)
- Workings (mud like material) found in wall voids
- Wood Rot (may attract termites)

### Recognising Active Termites

Subterranean termites are small insects, approximately the size of a grain of rice. Unlike the maggots that you may find in damp wood, termites have six legs and are more like ants, though without a constricted "waist"

### Termite Damage

Evidence of new activity is the presence of live termites or mud leads that were scraped off and subsequently rebuilt. Wood damage or mud leads with no visible termites are old termite evidence. Termite damaged wood has a laminated appearance with soil particles glued to the sides of the tunnel networks. The laminated appearance is due to the preferential feeding on the early wood of the annual growth ring

### Termite Damaged Timber

Subterranean termites tend to favour softwoods (pines etc) and faster growing hardwoods. Other building materials such as rigid polystyrene insulation boards, plaster, soft plastics, and underground cables, may be penetrated by foraging termites even though they do not feed on these materials.

### Termite Mud Leads

Termite mud leads are built by subterranean termites with soil particles, saliva and faeces. They require persistent moisture and soil contact to protect them from desiccation and predation. Mud leads can be seen on trees, stumps, structural timber and foundations walls.

## Fast facts

- It is no longer legal to treat for termites with organochlorines for environmental and health reasons
- Chemical treatments are only available to licensed pest controllers
- Have a program of regular inspections arranged with a pest controller
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## Incidence of termites



Source: "Orwood" 1999, CSIRO Forestry & Forest products

**For further information, please consult your Termite Manager**