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Detecting and Identifying Termites in a Structure

The threat of insects in or around your home can be alarming, especially when those insects can cause structural damage. It is important to know if insects you find around the house are in fact termites or some other crawling insect.

Subterranean termites are found everywhere in the contiguous United States, making the possibility of termite infestation a widespread structural damage problem. Early detection and treatment of termites can drastically reduce the threat of damage to your home.

Detection

Subterranean termites require moisture and usually remain hidden—they may never be seen by the homeowner. Termites often consume the interior portion of a piece of wood but leave the outer shell intact to protect themselves against desiccation (drying out). Therefore, it is easy to overlook the occurrence of termites and mistake a termite-damaged board for sound wood.

One clear indication of termite infestation is the appearance of shelter tubes made of soil and sand and stemming from an underground location near the building. These tubes protect the termites from desiccation as they travel between the soil and your house. Shelter tubes are found commonly in basements of infected homes or running from the soil to the house.

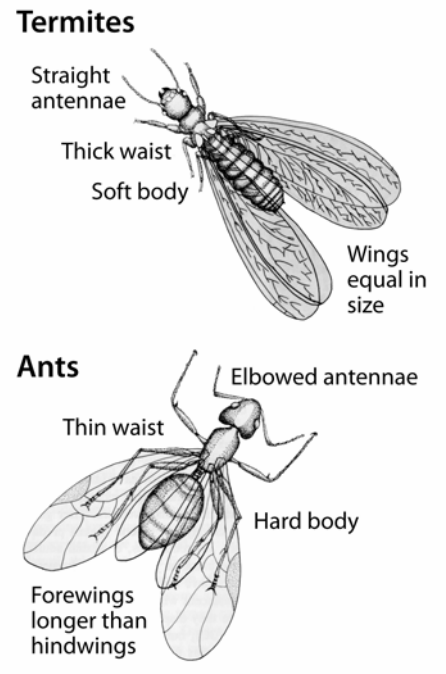
Termites are social insects and live in large colonies with organized caste systems. Worker termites—the most common caste encountered—are likely to be visible during a home inspection. Soldier termites, although far less numerous, are also likely to be found.

Identification

Both worker and soldier termites are white in color, with a small amount of brown on their backs, and are ¼-inch long. Worker termites lack the enlarged, dark yellow head and black mandibles of the soldier termite. Termites of the reproductive caste, called alate, are most commonly confused with ants because of their black color and the presence of wings. The wings of an alate are shed after mating, so wingless reproductive termites closely resemble ants. Fortunately, reproductive alates only fly for a short period in late spring.

Worker Soldier Alate

Four main characteristics differentiate termites from ants:



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