



## Pest Management

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### Termite Infestation Requires Professional Treatment

Termites are the most economically important pest of homes in the United States. Americans spend about \$2 billion each year on termite prevention and treatment. While there are many types of termites, the eastern subterranean termite (*Reticulitermes flavipes*) is the most common species in West Virginia and the most economically important one in the nation.

Termites are social insects, which divide the labor among the three types of individuals called castes. The termite castes are workers, soldiers, and reproductives. The largest caste is the workers, which perform most of the labor in the colony, including:

- constructing nest and tunnels
- feeding and grooming other members of the colony
- foraging

Soldiers have enlarged, hard heads modified for defense. The mouth is equipped with a pair of large mandibles, designed to slash, puncture, and crush their enemies, especially ants. The soldiers' primary purpose is to defend the colony.

Primary reproductives include the king and queen of the colony and swarmers. Swarmers disperse or swarm from the colony, generally between March through May, to start new colonies. Swarmers lose their wings, pair up, and construct a small chamber in the ground where the queen begins laying eggs. The original king and queen can live for more than a decade, and a colony can range in size from 60,000 to 5 million individuals.

A termite colony will have several nesting sites interconnected with passageways through the soil. Workers build extensive foraging tunnels looking for food; the tunnels can cover up to 1/3 acre.

Termites can eat a wide variety of foods. The main nutritional component of these foods is cellulose, the hard, structural element of wood and plant tissue. Foraging workers will consume wood that is buried or in direct contact with the soil. They will also forage for food above ground using mud tubes.

The mud tubes:

- allow termites to go over or around obstacles to get to wood
- provide a moist atmosphere
- provide protection from ants
- conceal the termites

Termites enter homes through cracks and openings around pipes, foundations, concrete block, and floors. Areas of a home that have high moisture are very attractive to termites. Under ideal conditions, 60,000 termites can consume 5 grams or 1/5 ounce of wood per day. Decayed wood will be eaten faster than sound wood. Damaged wood will contain dirt from the termite's mud tubes. A termite infestation can be recognized by the presence of one of the following: mud tubes, swarmers, or damaged wood.

Homeowners can do several things to make their homes less attractive to termites:

- Remove all wood-to-soil contact.
- Do not bury wood scraps during new construction.
- Never store firewood, lumber, or paper against the foundation or in a crawl space.
- Remove dead trees, stumps, and roots from the yard.
- Use metal flashing when attaching a porch or deck to a house.
- Never install foam board insulation below grade.
- Make sure there is adequate clearance under the house for inspection.
- Promptly repair leaky faucets, water pipes, and air conditioning units.
- Divert rainwater away from foundation.
- Use a vapor barrier in crawl space.
- Install 1 square foot of vent opening per each 300 to 500 square feet of crawl space.

Contact a professional pest control operator to treat infestations.