

IN-DEPTH GUIDE

Ants: the complete homeowner's guide

Everything a homeowner needs in one place, based on public guidance from the U.S. EPA and CDC, with links to every source.

PestGuardCo.com · To reach an independent local pest control company, call (855) 424-9709.

> Plain-language summary of public guidance from the U.S. EPA and CDC · Updated November 2026

Check these first

1. **Follow the trail** back to where the ants enter: a window, door frame, outlet or crack.
2. **Find what they're after**: crumbs, sugar, pet food, sticky spills, or water.
3. **Note the ant's size and color**: tiny and dark, larger and black, or reddish.
4. **Check for sawdust-like piles** near wood. That can mean carpenter ants.
5. **Check the yard** for mounds, especially after rain, and note whether they sting.

6 **Look for winged ants** indoors. A swarm can mean a nest inside.

If you see this, it usually means...

IF YOU SEE

A trail of tiny ants to the kitchen

IT USUALLY MEANS

Foraging ants after food or water

NEXT STEP

Clean the trail with soapy water and remove the food source.

IF YOU SEE

Large black ants indoors, especially at night

IT USUALLY MEANS

Possibly carpenter ants

NEXT STEP

Look for sawdust piles and damp wood nearby.

IF YOU SEE

Ants in the bathroom

IT USUALLY MEANS

Ants after water or damp spots

NEXT STEP

Fix leaks and dry wet areas.

IF YOU SEE

Mounds in the yard that sting

IT USUALLY MEANS

Possibly fire ants (in Southern states)

NEXT STEP

Keep kids and pets away and don't disturb the mound.

IF YOU SEE

Winged ants indoors

IT USUALLY MEANS

A nest may be inside the walls

NEXT STEP

Bag a few to compare with termites.

How to tell what you have

Carpenter ant

Large, about 1/4–1/2 in., usually black. Leaves sawdust-like piles.

Nests in damp or damaged wood; doesn't eat wood but hollows it out.

vs

Termite

Pale and soft-bodied workers; swarmers have straight antennae and equal wings.

Leaves mud tubes; feeds on wood.

SIZE

1/16 to 1/2 in.

COLOR

Black, brown or red

WHERE

Kitchens, bathrooms, window frames, yards

WHEN

Spring through fall

Find the source, not just the trail

The ants you see on the counter are foragers. The colony is somewhere else, in a wall, under the floor or outside. Following the trail back to the entry point tells you where to bait and what to seal.

EPA's first steps are to remove food, water and shelter: store food sealed, clean spills right away, and fix leaks so there's nothing to come in for.

Baits work because ants share food

Worker ants carry bait back to the nest and share it, so the product reaches the queen and the young. That's why baits often work better than sprays, which only kill the ants you can see.

EPA notes that baits are a good first line of chemical defense after prevention steps. Keep them out of reach of children and pets, and expect activity to rise briefly before it drops.

Carpenter ants and moisture

Carpenter ants don't eat wood but hollow it out to nest, usually in wood that's damp or already damaged. Sawdust-like piles near wood are the giveaway.

Finding and fixing the moisture source, such as a roof leak, plumbing leak or damp window frame, is part of the solution.

Stinging ants outdoors

Fire ants are found mostly in Southern states and build mounds in sunny areas. They sting when the mound is disturbed. CDC/NIOSH lists fire ants among stinging insects that can cause serious allergic reactions in some people.

Keep kids and pets away from mounds and don't disturb them. A pest control company can treat mounds and the yard.

What to do and what to avoid

Do

- Wipe the trail with soapy water to remove the scent path they follow.
- Clean up crumbs and sticky spills, and rinse food containers before recycling.
- Store sugar, honey, cereal and pet food in sealed containers.
- Seal the entry crack with caulk once the ants are gone from it.
- Use ant baits along the trail instead of spraying, and keep them away from kids and pets.

Avoid

- × Don't spray the trail with a repellent spray if you're using baits. It can scatter the colony.
- × Don't disturb fire ant mounds. They sting in large numbers.
- × Don't use outdoor products indoors.
- × Don't ignore carpenter ants with damp wood. The wood and the moisture both need attention.

Health and safety

- Most household ants are a nuisance, not a health risk.
- Fire ants sting, and stings can cause painful bumps. CDC/NIOSH notes some people have serious allergic reactions to stinging insects.
- If someone has trouble breathing or swelling of the face or throat after stings, call 911.

Prevention checklist

- Keep counters, floors and pet bowls clean.
- Store sweet and sticky foods sealed.
- Seal cracks around windows, doors and pipes.
- Trim branches and plants that touch the house; ants use them as bridges.
- Fix leaks and replace damp or rotting wood.
- Keep mulch and wood piles away from the foundation.

When to call a pro

Call a pro if ants keep coming back after a week of cleaning and baits, you suspect carpenter ants, or you have stinging fire ants in the yard.

1

Inspection

Identifying the ant and finding the nest, inside or out.

2

Baits and targeted treatment

Baits the ants carry back to the nest, plus treatment at entry points or the outside perimeter.

3

Moisture and wood check

For carpenter ants, finding the damp wood they're nesting in.

4

Follow-up

Checking that trails have stopped, and adjusting baits if needed.

To reach an independent local pest control company, call (855) 424-9709.

Questions

Why do ants keep coming back?

Usually because the nest is still active and there's still food or water to find. Baits plus removing the food source and sealing the entry point is what breaks the cycle.

Are carpenter ants as bad as termites?

They're different. Carpenter ants hollow out damp or damaged wood rather than eating it, and the damage is usually slower. They still need attention, along with the moisture problem.

Why do I see more ants after putting out bait?

Ants are being drawn to the bait and carrying it back. Activity usually drops within days to a couple of weeks.

Are ants in winter a sign of a nest indoors?

Often, yes. Ants active indoors in cold months usually have a nest inside the house.

Sources

Do You Really Need to Use a Pesticide? (https://www.epa.gov/safepestcontrol/do-you-really-need-use-pesticide) **U.S. EPA**

Preventing Pests at Home (fact sheet, PDF) (https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2014-01/documents/preventpest.pdf) **U.S. EPA**

Do's and Don'ts of Pest Control (https://www.epa.gov/safepestcontrol/dos-and-donts-pest-control) **U.S. EPA**

Got Pests? Control Them Safely (https://www.epa.gov/safepestcontrol/got-pests-control-them-safely) **U.S. EPA**

Insects and Scorpions at Work (https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/outdoor-workers/about/insects-and-scorpions.html) **CDC / NIOSH**

This guide is PestGuard's own plain-language summary of public guidance from U.S. government agencies (EPA and CDC). U.S. federal government publications are generally in the public domain; follow the links to read the originals. It is general information, not an

official government publication and not a substitute for an inspection. If you use any pest control product, read and follow the label. In an emergency, call 911. For pesticide questions, the National Pesticide Information Center can help: 1-800-858-7378.