

IN-DEPTH GUIDE

Termites: 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. **Look for mud tubes** (pencil-width tunnels of dirt) on the foundation, piers and crawl space walls.

2. **Check window sills and doors for piles of tiny wings**, especially after a warm spring day.

3. **Tap or probe exposed wood** in the basement or crawl space with a screwdriver. Soft or hollow spots are a warning sign.

4. **Look for bubbling or cracked paint** and wood that looks wavy or sunken.

5. **Look for tiny pellet-like droppings** near wood (a sign of drywood termites in some areas).

6. **Check where wood touches soil**: deck posts, porch steps, fence lines and wood piles.

If you see this, it usually means...

IF YOU SEE

Mud tubes on the foundation

IT USUALLY MEANS

Subterranean termites traveling from the soil

NEXT STEP

Don't break them all; leave them for the inspector to see.

IF YOU SEE

A swarm of winged insects indoors

IT USUALLY MEANS

Termites or flying ants

NEXT STEP

Collect a few in a sealed bag and compare (see below).

IF YOU SEE

Piles of wings by a window

IT USUALLY MEANS

A swarm already happened inside

NEXT STEP

Collect a sample and have the house inspected.

IF YOU SEE

Wood sounds hollow or crumbles

IT USUALLY MEANS

Possible termite feeding inside the wood

NEXT STEP

Have it inspected soon.

IF YOU SEE

Small pellets near wood

IT USUALLY MEANS

Possibly drywood termites

NEXT STEP

Bag a sample for an inspector.

How to tell what you have

Termite swarmer

Straight antennae, thick waist, and two pairs of wings that are the same length.

Wings come off easily and are often found in piles.

vs

Flying ant

Elbowed (bent) antennae, a pinched waist, and front wings longer than back wings.

Ant swarms are common too. EPA notes they're often mistaken for termites.

SIZE

About 1/4 to 1/2 in.

COLOR

Cream workers; dark winged swarmers

WHERE

Foundations, crawl spaces, framing

WHEN

Swarm in spring; feed all year

How do I know if I have termites?

EPA lists the main ways to find out: look for mud tubes on walls, wooden beams, crawl spaces and the foundation; probe exposed wood for hollow spots with a flathead screwdriver; and watch for swarms of winged insects, which are sometimes ant swarms mistaken for termites.

Swarms usually happen on warm days, often in spring. Finding discarded wings near windows and doors is a strong clue that a swarm happened inside.

Termite or flying ant?

Termites have straight antennae, a thick waist and two pairs of wings of equal length. Ants have bent antennae, a narrow pinched waist, and front wings longer than the back ones.

If you're not sure, collect a few in a sealed bag. An inspector or your local extension office can tell you quickly.

Prevention starts with moisture and wood-to-soil contact

Subterranean termites need moisture and travel from the soil. Keep soil, mulch and wood debris away from the house, fix leaks, and make sure water drains away from the foundation.

Where wood must touch soil, such as deck posts, use treated or resistant wood. Keep crawl spaces dry and ventilated.

Treatment options

EPA describes several kinds of termite treatment: liquid termiticides applied to the soil, bait systems placed around the house, and wood treatments. Some physical barriers are built in during construction.

EPA's advice on products: if the label doesn't include directions to control termites and protect the structure, the product isn't meant for that and shouldn't be used. This is why most homeowners use a pest control company for termites.

Choosing a company

Ask for a written inspection report and plan: what they found, where, what they'll use, and how they'll monitor it afterward. Ask what follow-up inspections are included.

EPA's Citizen's Guide has more tips on choosing a pest control company, and your state pesticide agency can tell you what credentials companies need in your state.

What to do and what to avoid

Do

- Collect a few swarmers or wings in a sealed bag or with clear tape for the inspector.
- Move firewood, mulch and wood debris away from the foundation.
- Fix leaks and make sure gutters and downspouts drain away from the house.
- Make sure there's a gap between soil and any wood siding or framing.
- Note where you saw the signs and when. Take photos.

Avoid

- ✕ Don't spray swarmers with store-bought spray and assume the problem's solved. Swarmers are only a small part of the colony.
- ✕ Don't break open all the mud tubes before an inspection.
- ✕ Don't apply products to soil or wood yourself unless the label clearly covers termite control for structures.
- ✕ Don't wait months to have it checked. Termite damage builds slowly but steadily.

Health and safety

- Termites aren't known to spread disease and rarely bite people.
- The risk is to the structure: they feed on wood from the inside out, often for years before damage shows.
- Swarmers indoors are harmless to people; they die quickly without soil.

Prevention checklist

- Keep soil, mulch and firewood from touching the house's wood.
- Fix moisture problems: leaks, poor drainage, damp crawl spaces.
- Keep gutters clean and downspouts pointed away from the foundation.
- Ventilate crawl spaces and keep them dry.
- Use treated or naturally resistant wood for decks and posts that touch soil.
- Have the house checked yearly if termites are common in your area.

When to call a pro

Call a pro if you find mud tubes, see swarmers or piles of wings indoors, or find soft or hollow wood.

1

Inspection

Checking the foundation, crawl space, basement, attic and wood-to-soil contact points for tubes, damage and moisture.

2

Identification

Confirming termites (and which type) versus ants or other wood pests.

3

Treatment plan

Commonly soil treatment around the foundation, bait systems, or wood treatment, depending on the type and the house.

4

Monitoring

Ongoing checks or bait station monitoring, often yearly.

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Questions

Are termite swarmers in my house dangerous?

Not to people. They don't bite or sting and die quickly indoors. But they're a sign a colony may be active in or near the house.

Can termites be in a brick or concrete house?

Yes. Subterranean termites can travel through small cracks and along pipes to reach wood framing, floors and trim inside.

How fast do termites do damage?

Usually slowly, over months and years, which is why yearly checks in termite-prone areas are common.

Should I treat termites myself?

Most homeowners don't. Structural termite control needs the right product, equipment and placement around the whole foundation.

Sources

Termites: How to Identify and Control Them (https://www.epa.gov/safepestcontrol/termites-how-identify-and-control-them) **U.S. EPA**

Citizen's Guide to Pest Control and Pesticide Safety (https://www.epa.gov/safepestcontrol/citizens-guide-pest-control-and-pesticide-safety) **U.S. EPA**

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

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.