



Termites

Termites cause more damage to Australian houses than fire, floods and storms combined – and the damage may not be covered by household insurance.

Concealed in locations that often go undetected, termites destroy timber internally, leaving only a very thin layer to protect them from the outside environment. There is no predictable pattern to termite damage – infested sites can be found in roofs and even high-rise buildings.

If you are building, extending or renovating within an area your local council has designated to be subjected to termite infestation, you must have some form of management against termite attack. Check with your council.

Termite management

Termite management involves reducing the chances of termites damaging your house.

The aim is to keep any cellulose material, especially timber, away from soil contact and to encourage termites to build a mud tube out in the open where it can be seen during a regular, careful inspection. Termite management systems are designed to prevent access to concealed access and force termites into the open where their mud tunnels can be more easily detected.

Physical barriers range from small graded stone particles, stainless steel mesh and chemically treated products. Termite resistant materials are designed to protect the critical concealed structural elements of your home, while providing a small target for any termite activity.

At the design stage

If you are building a new home or extension, you can choose to use termite resistant primary structures like concrete slabs, termite resistant timber and steel frames. This option uses conventional materials and construction methods and does not rely on a regular maintenance system or professional liability policy.

Alternatively, you can specify a physical or chemical barrier to be installed during construction. This should be in accordance with the Australian Standard AS3660.1. Some barriers will require ongoing inspections, maintenance or replenishment of chemicals.

During construction

The risk of attack can be reduced by removing tree stumps, roots and off-cuts, and by properly consolidating the soil to minimise cracks in concrete slabs.

Concrete is a very effective termite barrier if it is correctly designed and constructed on properly prepared ground. But cracks as small as 1.5 mm may allow termites to find their way into a cavity inside walls and beneath floors.

Buying a house

We strongly recommend that before you buy a house, you have an expert inspect it for termite activity.

Engage a properly qualified, experienced and insured pest inspector to provide a report on the house. The report should include the details of any termite management system that has been installed, and on the materials used for critical structural elements.

Identifying termite activity

Termite activity is often difficult to detect as it usually occurs in concealed areas. We recommend regularly looking in and around your home to try and identify any potential termite activity. Things to look for include:

- weak timber that breaks easily revealing wafer thin layers – skirting boards are often the first point of damage
- changes in corner fascia under gutters, as termites are attracted to damp or moist areas
- mud-like tubes or material around external footings/brickwork, or internal fittings like service pipes and electrical plugs
- cracks or holes in timber or plaster with a fine dust residue.

Look at surrounding trees, wood piles and garden beds (up to a 50 metres radius around the home) for signs of an active colony nearby.

If you suspect any termite activity, book an expert to conduct a full inspection.

If you find termites

If you find termites, engage an approved pest controller. They can recommend the best treatment, which may include chemical spray options, reticulation and/or baiting systems.

Don't use surface spray or rip out floorboards or other affected building material. You may kill a few termites in those timbers, but you will have reduced the chances of an expert effectively treating the main nest. The termites will regroup and probably attack another section of the house.

Termites regularly re-infest with multiple nests attached to the colony in a radius of more than 50 metres. If you do discover an infestation, you should immediately notify your neighbours and local council.

Termite tips

The following tips can help you avoid termite damage:

- Understand the system of termite management in your house and the maintenance requirements.
- Check your property and building regularly for termite activity to reduce the risk of damage.
- Have a pest controller inspect the house every 12 months, especially if you are in a high hazard area.
- Address plumbing leaks, drainage problems and roof leaks promptly, as termites are attracted to damp conditions.
- Do not build up garden beds and mulching against walls, as this allows termites an undetectable entry point to the building.
- Do not stack materials against walls, as this can allow termites to enter without early detection.
- Sub-floor areas should be well ventilated – ensure vents are not obstructed.
- Don't store cellulose products under the house.
- Use termite-resistant timber for works around the property, including retaining walls.
- Use metal stirrups for verandas and gateposts.
- Regularly clean and check timber decks.