

Termites in Wisconsin Insect Diagnostic Lab Note

In the last five years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of sites that have active termite infestations in the state. We have seen samples or heard of problems in the insect diagnostic lab from Waukesha, Milwaukee, Racine, Kenosha, Dane, Rock, Sheboygan, Walworth, LaCrosse, Marquette, Green, Ozaukee, Rusk, Columbia, Brown, Trempealeau, Juneau and Winnebago counties. Termites have been moving northward since the advent of centralized heating. In almost every case, the infestation is brought in on infested landscape timbers, railroad ties, or other infested wood. Once they get established, they slowly spread and can attack a large area.

What do they look like? Worker termites look like small cream colored ants. They do not have the pinched waist of an ant, and their antennae are straight and bead like and not bent or “elbowed” as they are in ants. Workers are only found if tubes are broken or infested wood is opened up. The winged termites (swarmers) are dark brown to black and have long clear wings that break off easily. Swarmers are active from March through early June.



Worker termite



Winged termite

Winged Ant

What types of termites? The only native termite in Wisconsin is the Eastern subterranean termite. This group must live in the ground and moves up into the home in small mud tubes to feed. Termites are very sensitive to desiccation and stay hidden in the ground or within the wood they attack. Often they go undetected until damaged wood is found or swarmers appear indoors.

How do we control termites? The standard treatment is to inject insecticides into the soil around the outside walls and under the foundation. This usually requires drilling every 12 inches into basement floors, concrete steps, and into hollow blocks. Trenches are dug along the outside walls and insecticide is injected to the top of the footing. The idea is to have an unbroken chemical barrier between the wood in the structure and the termite colony in the soil. The average size home may require 200 gallons or more of dilute treatment. These treatments should be done by certified and insured applicators. Any change in the soil around the house can break the “barrier.”

During the last six years, baits have become available to treat infestations. The treatments use very small quantities of less toxic insect growth chemicals. Termites constantly feed each other and eventually spread the product to all members of the colony. It can take up to 18 months or more to eliminate a colony. Bait stations must be monitored on a regular basis. The most successful baiting systems are available only by pest control companies. The over-the-counter baits people find in stores are not as reliable. Baiting contracts are equal to or slightly more expensive than the standard treatments.



Damage to wooden beam--note mud caked on wood.

When should I treat? Only when there are signs of active termite activity in the building. If neighbors have an infestation it is important to have the house inspected yearly, but we do not recommend a “preventative” treatment. If you do have a problem take time to call two or more companies to get a price and opinion. Termite damage happens slowly so there is no need to be forced into a quick decision.

If you have any questions or need more details please feel free to contact the lab.

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