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Inspecting For Termites

Termites are found throughout the tropical and temperate parts of the world. New York is plagued most commonly by two species of “subterranean” termites. These social, colonizing insects live almost entirely inside the materials on which they feed. For the colony to survive, there must be a connection between the materials, usually wood, and the soil.

Termites are delicate, soft-bodied creatures, in that they are subject to desiccation (drying out) from exposure to wind and/or sun. This vulnerability encourages the subterranean termite to build “mud” tunnels or shelter tubes over obstacles to get at a food source. Once they reach wood or a cellulose food source, the tunnels provide necessary shelter. Mud tunnels are constructed of soil and other materials. They form a protective channel which allows the termite to move through hostile territory, safe from exposure to the environment or predators.

When looking for a termite infestation, there are two things to keep in mind: Is there any wood in direct contact with the soil? If not, what are all the possible ways these resourceful insects can get to the wood?

How and Where to Look

Termite damage is most often not noticeable on the surface. There are no holes on the wood surface or accumulation of wood powder or “sawdust” to betray the colony. Affected wood usually appears normal. Termite presence is most often revealed in one of the following ways:

- presence of shelter tubes
- collapse of damaged wood
- swarming of winged termites accompanied by shedding of their wings near the exit (this most often occurs directly after a warm spring rain)
- exposure during structural alterations

Damage is most likely to occur at the lowermost parts of a structure before spreading upward. Tools that you will need include a good, bright flashlight, a hammer, and an ice pick. Search every foot of the outside base of the home. Remove any unnecessary materials that make contact with the building and may act as a bridge from the soil. Stack piles of firewood away from the building and rotate the stock by using the old wood first. Don’t overlook an area because shrubbery is in the way; get in behind the shrubs and inspect around them. Look for tunnels and cracks in concrete. Lightly tap the wood with a hammer for solidness. Probe with the ice pick to test for soft spongy wood. Check downspouts for tubes. These are good bridges to the soil. Keep the soil level as low as possible along the foundation, never allowing soil to stay in contact with the wood frame.

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In homes with basements, use a good light to search all parts of the frame that make contact with the foundation. Again, look for shelter tubes and lightly tap the wood with a hammer. Look closely at any openings in the concrete foundation, for example, where plumbing pipes pass through. Termites will take advantage of any opening, manmade or not. Paneling may be covering a healthy colony, particularly in a basement. Open sections of the paneling and search carefully. At the same time, you will have the opportunity to check the foundation for leaks and other problems.

Slab-built homes are more difficult to inspect due to the limited accessibility inherent in that type of construction. These houses, in which the first floor is a concrete slab resting directly on the soil, may be attacked by termites. The colony usually lives beneath the slab and attacks various wood structures after finding some means of coming through or around the slab. A crack $\frac{1}{32}$ of an inch is all they need.

A common channel of entry is the insulation of expansion joints, particularly if fillers, such as asbestos, cellulose materials, or foam rubber, have been used. Cracks in the slab itself, and crevices around pipes and conduits sometimes provide a means of passage. Openings in the concrete of any type, particularly where plumbing systems pass through, provide excellent avenues for entrance.

Any wooden structures laid upon the slab may be attacked, including wood floors, door frames, baseboards, and wood framing. Tap wood with a hammer for structural soundness. A rubber mallet can be used if the wood finish is to be protected. Pay particular attention to the wood closest to the slab. Check all walls, not just exterior walls. With a good light, inspect bathrooms where pipes make contact with the floor and wall. Use an ice pick to check for soft wood. This inspection has the additional benefit of possibly uncovering rotting wood due to a dampness problem.

Termite activity is increased and prolonged-even in northern areas-where the wood within, and the soil adjacent to, heated homes is kept warm throughout most of the year. The conditions under which termite colonies thrive are rather rigid-more is required than the existence of wood. Much depends on how the structure is built or how available the food source is to the termites. Unless it is possible for the termites to maintain contact with soil and have food readily available, they will die.

Certain steps taken during construction will greatly reduce or prevent termite damage. If those techniques were not used during construction, then regular inspection is necessary to prevent a loss due to termites. Where termites are suspected, contact a professional pest company with a reputation for effective termite work.

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