

# Termite Swarms

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Spring is here, the birds are chirping, the sun is shining, and TERMITES are swarming! In nature, termites are good guys, since they help break down dead trees that would otherwise pile deeper and deeper over time. In our homes termites are bad guys, and finding out that you have termites can be a very frightening ordeal. Your largest investment is being eaten out from under you and you can't even see it happening. It is not an uncommon occurrence in central Texas. In fact, 1 out of every 4 untreated homes will become infested with termites within 5 years of construction. Because an average sized colony of 250,000 individuals can eat around 7 pounds of wood per year, it is important that you take steps to prevent or eliminate termite infestations in your home.

The first step in putting a stop to termites is to understand how they live. The kind of termites we encounter most often in this part of the state are called subterranean termites. These termites live below the soil like ants, but do not produce visible mounds. Termite colonies are started by winged termites that leave their nests during spring swarming flights to mate and start new colonies. After the swarming flight, happy termite couples dig a hole and begin laying eggs that will become un-winged worker, soldier, and reproductive termites. The workers venture out to find wood to feed the rest of the colony. These fragile, white, ant-like creatures need the moisture in the soil to survive. The concrete slab under your house acts as a barrier to termites looking to feed on your house. In order to invade your house, they have to build a mud tube on the outside of the slab, along cracks in the slab, or along the outside of pipes that penetrate the slab. Mud tubes maintain the moisture termites need while feeding on your house.

Now that we know how they can get in, how do we stop them? The very first thing we should focus on is prevention. Before your home is built, it should be pre-treated for termites. There are several ways to do this, ranging from soil treatment to physical barriers or wood treatment. The most common method is soil treatment, which involves treating of the soil under your house with several hundred gallons of an insecticide mixture before the slab is poured. An alternative method is to use physical barriers, which may be insecticide impregnated plastic or tightly woven screen. Finally, with wood treatment you can build with treated wood or treat the wood frame after it is up. Treating the wood frame is a method that is gaining popularity. Termite baiting systems are also allowed for pretreatment. All of these methods are effective when properly applied. You should discuss each method with a knowledgeable pest management professional before making a decision.

After your house is built, you must be vigilant in preventing conditions conducive to termite infestation. I find that the most common conditions conducive to termite infestation are wood to ground contact, excessive moisture, and soil line or mulch over the foundation. Remember, termites live in the soil and must build shelter tubes to maintain moisture while feeding on your house. If a wooden part of your house is touching the soil, termites can walk right in without building shelter tubes. You will never see them. A leaky faucet can create

termite-appealing damp wood and allow them to feed in the house without maintaining soil contact. A soil line that is above the foundation permits termites to enter in the small gaps between the foundation and brick, wood, hardy plank, or stucco siding. Again, they walk right in without giving away their position with shelter tubes.

Okay, so maybe you didn't take care of the conducive conditions or your soil pre-treatment barrier was broken during a landscaping project. Now, it's April and your bathroom is filling up with hundreds of black, flying insects. It's a termite swarm! What do you do? The first thing to do is remember not to panic. Don't let anyone talk you in to rushing your termite control decision. Termites are bad, but they aren't going to eat your house up over night. You should find a reputable pest management professional to present you with the control choices available. Then, do your own research to help decide what method is best for you.

You will probably learn about liquid treatment or baiting, either alone or in combination, because they are the most popular control methods. With liquid treatments, a small trench is dug around your house and liquid insecticide is applied. The insecticide is then buried and forms a barrier to termites. A liquid treatment also involves drilling holes in the slab near cracks, plumbing penetrations, or patios and porches to form a more complete barrier. Any place there is a known infestation should be treated. Some types of liquid termiticides are slow acting enough to spread around the colony, reducing colony size and possibly eliminating the colony.

Termite baiting is a newer, environmentally friendly approach to termite control. With this method, monitoring stations are placed every 10-15 feet around the perimeter of your house. Each station contains a block of wood. Stations are checked every 30 to 90 days for the presence of termites. Once termites have found the wood, it is replaced with a slow acting poison bait. Termites collect the bait and feed it to other members of the colony. The colony is greatly reduced in size and may be eliminated. Never fear for the termite, though, as other colonies typically move in and take over the old colony's territory.

Termites are definitely something to be concerned about, since they can cost you thousands of dollars in repairs and control costs. You have to keep in mind that they are just bugs. You are smarter than they are, especially after reading this article! Just practice good prevention and be smart when selecting a control method to keep termites from taking a bite out of pine!