

Do it Yourself Termite Inspection

A client, Anita Kratzner, recently found some bugs around her home and was concerned that they may be termites. In Arizona, our main problem is with subterranean termites (termites that normally live below ground and move up into a structure where they cause damage) so we don't usually see them. The most obvious sign of subterranean termite infestation is mud tunneling. Subterranean termites build mud shelter tubes in which they travel. These mud shelter tubes are connected with the termite colony and are constructed of dirt and an acid substance that the worker termites secrete. The mud shelter tube helps to protect the worker termites from predators such as ants, and also provides them with humidity. Most importantly, mud shelter tubes give the blind worker and soldier termites a highway in which to travel to and from their food sources. Mud shelter tubes are very hard packed, and usually as they get older, they get harder and larger.

Mud shelter tubes are usually seen on the outsides of foundation walls, extending from the ground up to the stucco or siding. They can also be seen emerging from sheetrock in ceilings, and on walls. Break open the tubes to see if termites are still active. An empty tube doesn't necessarily mean that termites are gone; they may have simply abandoned this particular tunnel. Termites often rebuild damaged tubes, which is another indication of current activity. 'Old' tubes are dry and crumble easily, leaving behind "etching" on the surface that may be visible for years (an indication that a house had termite activity at some time). Without knowing the inspection history of the house, it is impossible to tell or guess at the age of tunnels or etching.

Tubes that are found on ceilings or on the second floor of buildings may indicate that you have a "secondary" or aboveground ("aerial") infestation, i.e., the termite colony actually lives in the building. Secondary infestations occur when there is a serious moisture problem or leak somewhere within the structure. In such situations, a thorough inspection may require removal of siding or interior wallboards, etc. More importantly for you, secondary infestations cannot be controlled with the usual soil treatment.

Look for these signs of termite feeding:

- Wood that sounds "hollow" when it is tapped with the handle of a screwdriver.
- Soft wood that is easily probed with a knife or screwdriver.
- "Bubbles" in the sheetrock walls or ceiling. (They eat the paper backing off the sheetrock but leave the plaster and paint).
- A thin gritty gray-brown film on the surface of damaged material.

Check the baseboards, door frames, cabinets and wood paneling, exterior eaves, fascia board, patio cover and posts or columns.

There is no accurate method for determining the age of recently discovered damage. You need some reference point, i.e., some point in time when it was known that there was no damage to this particular wood. This is one reason why annual inspections (and keeping your records of these inspections) are invaluable. NOTE: These inspections are not a guarantee that you do not have termites or damage in visually-inaccessible areas, such as inside walls. However, the inspections can reveal conditions that might suggest that damage does exist and further investigation is needed.