

There are three major groups of termites, which occur in the United States: subterranean, dry wood, and Formosan. Termites are identified by the appearance of the swarmers, their damage, and the droppings they leave behind.

The two most common types of termites are "subterranean" and "dry wood" termites. Subterranean termites cause about 95% of the termite-related damage found in the United States. Both types of termites eat cellulose for nutrition. Cellulose is found in wood and wood products. Subterranean termite feeding follows the grain of the wood. Unlike dry wood termites or other wood-boring insects, subterranean termites do not push wood particles or pellets (fecal material) to the outside, but rather use it in the construction of their mud tubes. This debris, along with sand and soil particles, is used as a form of plaster.

Subterranean termites build earthen, shelter tubes to protect them from low humidity and predation. These tubes are usually 1/4 to 1 inch wide. Houses should be inspected at least once a year for evidence of tubes. If the house has a crawl space, it should be accessible for inspection. If the house has a concrete slab floor, cracks in concrete floors and places where pipes and utilities go through the slab should be closely examined. Cracks in concrete foundations and open voids in concrete block foundations are also hidden avenues of entry. Concrete slab and basement foundations are some of the most susceptible types of construction. Termites only need a crack of one-sixty-fourth inch in the slab floor to gain entrance into your home. Termites cause more damage to homes in U.S. than storms and fire combined; colonies can contain up to 1,000,000 members.

The advent of centrally heated homes has made it possible for termites to become a threat in virtually every region and state in the U.S. On the average, there could be as many as 13 to 14 subterranean termite colonies per acre, which means that a typical home may easily have three to four colonies situated under or around it. And because there can be as many as 1,000,000 subterranean termites per colony, the threat of infestation becomes a very real one indeed.

Subterranean termites nest in the soil to obtain moisture, but they also nest in wood that is often wet. They easily attack any wood in contact with the ground. If the wood does not contact the soil, they can build mud tunnels or tubes to reach wood several feet above the ground. These tunnels can extend for 50-60 feet to reach wood and often enter a structure through expansion joints in concrete slabs or where utilities enter the house. Termites are able to travel up to 130 feet from the colony – and once they discover a food source, they leave a "chemical trail" for others to follow. Termites work 24 hours a day. "Worker" termites bring food to the colony through tunnels, without ever resting.

They can form "secondary nests" above the ground called "aeria colonies". These independent nests may survive independent of the ground if there is a moisture source available. Such sources of moisture would be from a leaky roof, plumbing leaks, or rotten wood materials. All moisture problems must be fixed in order to control subterranean termites.