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## 2.1 Termites – Frequently Asked Questions

### **Q. What are Termites?**

Termites are an insect which feed on cellulose based material (wood fibre). They serve an important function in nature by converting cellulose into organic matter. Unfortunately, termites find wood in many residential and commercial buildings just as appetising. They have been known to feed on other materials including rubber, plastics and fibreglass.

### **Q. Are Termites the same as white ants?**

They are often referred to as “white ants” primarily because of their superficial resemblance, however they are not ants. Termites are in fact more closely related to cockroaches.

### **Q. How many species are there?**

Australia has more than 300 species of termites, with three major types of termites. These are found in three main groupings: Drywood termites, Dampwood termites and Subterranean termites.

Drywood termites as their name indicates, obtain water for survival from wood – they do not need to have any contact with soil.

Dampwood termites are usually dependent on moisture from damp and decaying wood. They are generally found in coastal areas.

Subterranean termites, the most common and damaging kind, thrive in warm, moist soils and normally live underground in nests near wood food sources – including homes. They usually live in colonies in the soil, as they need to maintain contact with the soil to obtain sufficient moisture to survive. However they may also create mounds or nests in trees in which to live.

### **Q. If termites live underground, what are those bugs that fly?**

At least once a year during warmer months, a thriving termite colony will send winged reproductives, or “swarmers”, away from the colony to mate and begin new colonies. Discarded wings are generally a good indication that there is a termite colony nearby.

Ants also swarm. One way you can distinguish a termite alate from an ant alate is the length of their wings. Termites have equal length wings whereas an ants front wings are longer than the rear ones.

### **Q. What are Alates?**

The eggs laid by the queen hatch into nymphs. By moulting several times the young nymphs change into various castes such as workers, soldiers & alates.

The fully winged alates leave the colony during the colonizing flight to set up new colonies.

When a pair of de-alates (alates which have dropped their wings) set up in a suitable environment (eg. in decayed wood in soil), they hollow out a small chamber in which they mate, and then the female lays a small number of eggs.

At this stage the future king & queen must feed and look after the young.

It requires some 2-5 years before it has sufficient strength in numbers to seriously damage timber in a building.

The egg production at first is small, perhaps a batch of 10-20, but after some years the original queen may lay over 1000 eggs per day.

**Q. How do they cause so much damage?**

Each colony is built around a king and queen – whose sole job is reproduction. Most colonies are made up of worker termites that cause damage to your home. They are social insects that work and live in colonies that can last up to 50 years. A typical termite colony can contain hundreds of thousands of workers.

Most termite damage is invisible as they eat from the inside of timber outwards – rarely breaking through the surface.

**Q. My house is brick, I can't get termites?**

Any building is a target for termites. They have been found as high as the 25<sup>th</sup> floor of a high-rise building.

**Q. How common is termite activity?**

Figures from a CSIRO Double Helix study reveal the alarming percentage of housing sites in Australia with termite activity of some form: 32% in NSW, 17% in VIC, 41% in QLD, 56% in WA, 35% in SA, 32% in ACT, 71% in NT.

Termites cause more than \$200 million damage in Australia every year.

**Q. How long have they been around?**

Termites have existed for approximately 100 million years.

**Q. My house was treated with chemicals that last a lifetime, so I won't get termites?**

The organochlorine insecticides, Aldrin, Dieldrin, Heptachlor and Chlordane underpinned termite control in Australia from 1960-1995. In July 1995 the organochlorine insecticides were banned in all states of Australia except NT where a two year extension was granted that concluded in 1997. These materials although long lived degraded over time.

**Q. What is the mud that I sometimes see on houses and is it termites or wasps that cause it?**

Whenever termites leave the nest in their search for food, they construct mud tunnels to protect them from predators. It also ensures a comfortable temperature and level of moisture is maintained within the workings. A trained professional can detect the difference.

**Q. What should I do if I suspect my house has termites?**

If you see evidence of active termites in your house – do not disturb them. It will make it much harder to get rid of them. You can arrange for one of our technicians to come and give your house a thorough inspection and let you know what options you have.