

Finding a good pest manager

The issues you need to be aware of when getting quotes for an inspection and termite management plan.

GETTY

IN A NUTSHELL

■ **Licensing requirements** for timber pest inspectors vary from state to state; only in some is specific knowledge about timber pests required.

■ **The trend in termite management** is towards an integrated approach, with emphasis on physical barriers and baits using chemicals that are less hazardous than those used in the past.

■ **Not all apparent industry associations** may be what they seem — beware of what looks like a ‘front’ for a group of companies.

They can build huge earthen mounds with elaborate tunnels inside, or hollow out majestic trees. But only around 30 of the more than 350 termite species in Australia are of concern to home owners, as they can eat the timber your home is built with and cause considerable economic damage. Most of these are subterranean; drywood termites are only of concern in some restricted coastal and tropical areas.

The subterranean termites that cause much of the damage in many areas around the country are often called white ants, although they’re not ants and have little in common with them. They generally feed on cellulose-containing materials (mainly timber), eating the inside and leaving a thin shell for protection from the outside environment.

As they need to stay in contact with moisture, subterranean termites usually build their nests in the soil or in a tree, dead or alive. However, they can travel up to 100 m away from their nest in search of food sources in the bush ... or in our homes.

RECOGNISING TERMITE ACTIVITY

It’s estimated one in five homes in Australia is treated for termite damage at some stage of its life — around 130,000 buildings each year. Not just timber houses are at risk, but also brick and steel-framed ones. A 1999 CSIRO study of more than 4000 households across Australia found the materials used for floors and wall framing seemed not to influence the chance of termite attack at all. Temperature and rainfall had the biggest impact, followed by the house’s age.

Apart from eating away structural timbers (frames, walls, roof or floor) and making the home unsafe, termites are also known to chomp their way through furniture, paper products, fabrics, clothing, footwear, and even non-cellulose materials such as soft plastics, building sealants and rigid foam insulation.

Much of the damage they inflict can result in considerable repair costs before you’ve even noticed them. So look out for signs of termite activity — the tell-tale brownish mud shelter tubes they build for protection are the most obvious sign (see the photos, pages 18–20). Others include sagging floors or doors, loose trim, cracked paint or plaster, or power failures, as termites, attracted to the warmth of electrical fittings behind walls, chew through electrical insulation.

Regular and thorough inspections are necessary to detect the early signs of termite infestation. But finding a pest manager who’s adequately trained and experienced isn’t as easy as checking a licence. “There’s so much going on in this industry that leaves the average consumer so confused,” remarked one of our Sydney readers, who had first been told there were no termites in her house and then, by another inspector, that there were lots, and it would cost a lot of money to get rid of them.

So for this article we’ve consulted experts in the field to find out what issues you should be aware of when choosing a pest manager. There’s also an overview of the current methods of termite management (page 21); heaps more information on this topic is available on the internet, in books, from the CSIRO and from forestry and timber development departments.

GETTING QUOTES

Termite damage to buildings in Australia has increased in the past decade since the hazardous organochlorine pesticides formerly used to treat termite infestations were largely banned in the 1990s. The new, less hazardous chemicals now used are generally less persistent in the environment and require greater skills of the pest manager to apply them.

With the average cost of a termite treatment estimated at around \$1500 — plus potentially many thousands of dollars for repairing termite damage — it's well worth getting familiar with the subject before organising an inspection or committing yourself to a particular termite management plan.

Phone several pest managers and take notes of your calls. You're unlikely to get detailed information or a specific price over the phone, but you should be able to get a general impression about the company, the pest manager who'll do the inspection — and termite treatment, if one is necessary — and a range of prices you can expect.

Compare the options each pest manager presents, the prices they quote and the professionalism they display, then choose the company (and treatment, if required) you're most comfortable with. Make sure, however, that you're comparing like with like. The various termite management methods currently used (and discussed on page 21) can vary in price from a few hundred to several thousands of dollars. The cheapest you're offered might only rid you of termites in the short term; an integrated approach

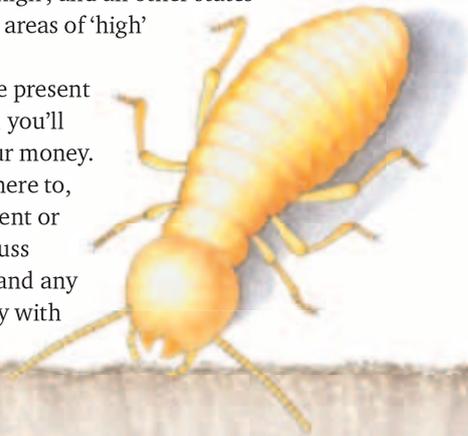
might cost more at the outset but provide better protection from future termite attacks.

Below are some *Questions to ask* on the phone when getting quotes for an inspection.

THE INSPECTION

It's recommended you have a thorough pest inspection at least once a year, more often in areas with high termite risk. (According to the CSIRO's termite hazard map, only Tasmania rates 'negligible' for termite risk. Large tropical and subtropical areas in WA, the NT and Queensland, plus an area around Perth, are rated 'very high', and all other states except Tasmania have areas of 'high' termite risk.)

Make the time to be present during the inspection; you'll get more value for your money. Not only will you be there to, say, unlock the basement or attic, but you can discuss potential approaches and any problems straightaway with



Questions to ask

About the company

- How long has your company been established? (Avoid dealing with a pest manager who only lists a mobile phone number and PO box with no address, unless you know or can find out more about them. They may be difficult to trace if there are problems later with the inspection or treatment.)
- Are you a member of an industry association? (See *Industry associations*, page 19, for more on this.)
- Can you supply a portfolio of evidence? (This should include evidence of a current licence and up-to-date professional indemnity and public liability insurance certificates, as well as written references from or phone numbers of recent clients. The sections on pages 18 and 20 on licensing requirements and insurance have more on this.)

About the inspector

- What are the qualifications and skills of the pest inspector? (See *Licensing requirements*, page 18, for information on how to interpret the answer.)

- Has the pest inspector done any ongoing training since gaining the qualification?
- How much experience does the pest inspector have in termite management?
- Will the person you just gave me the information about also do the termite treatment, if one is required? If not, how experienced is that person? (Someone in training is OK, as long as they're appropriately supervised. If subcontractors are used, it's best to find out this whole set of information about them too.)

About the inspection and termite management

- Will the inspection be carried out in accordance with, or exceed, the requirements of the Australian standard? (AS4349.3 provides guidelines for inspecting buildings for timber pests; AS3660.2 deals with termite management in and around existing buildings and structures.)
- How long do you envisage the inspection will take? (An average house should probably take two to three hours to inspect, which includes the time the inspector spends discussing the issues with you and taking notes. If a shorter time is quoted, ask the company how many assessments the inspector does in a day — more than two, especially with travel time in between, could mean the inspector is tired or rushed.)
- Will the inspection also cover borers and wood-decay fungi?
- Will you provide a report in writing? (A written report is absolutely necessary, so you have something you can refer to when you need to, or for a future negligence claim. See *The inspection*, above, for what a report should contain.)
- If termites are found, what treatment methods do you usually recommend? (Office staff who give quotes and advise clients should know about these. For an overview of what's currently offered, see *Dealing with termites*, page 21.)
- Will you bring any brochures or other information on the products you're likely to use? (So that you'll know in advance about any chemicals they'll use, their toxicity and safety matters.)



To get to the food source from their habitat underground, subterranean termites have built mud shelter tubes over the rendered bricks to the timber house.

the inspector, so that an appropriate solution can be tailored to your needs.

The inspector should bring, as a minimum, a long-handled probe or screwdriver, moisture meter, torch, ladder, binoculars, compass, knife and magnifying glass and may well have access to a range of more sophisticated equipment. They should inspect, if practical, all accessible timbers underneath the house and under the roof, inside and outside the building and its surrounds, garden, fences, trees and stumps and other timber structures and trees on the property, up to around 50 m from the main building.

The inspector should also check the presence and effectiveness of visible and accessible termite barriers and the susceptibility of the property to termite infestation (things such as subfloor ventilation and drainage, obvious areas of damp, etc). Furniture and furnishings as well as stored and concealed timbers are usually excluded.

When you get the pest inspection report, read it carefully and if anything is unclear, talk to the inspector. It should include details of the areas inspected (and mention inaccessible areas not inspected), evidence of termite activity (active and old) and, if termite activity was found, an integrated termite management

proposal detailing methods, costs and an assessment of all options and expected outcomes and limitations.

For a termite inspection of an average-size home in a capital city you can expect to be charged between \$200 and \$400, depending on the building size, style and ease of access. Considering the damage termites can cause, it's a wise investment — as long as the inspection is done professionally by a suitably qualified pest manager and the advice is sound and tailored to your situation.

LICENSING REQUIREMENTS

In theory — and in line with the recommendations of the relevant Australian standards — a timber pest inspector should possess a certain amount of technical knowledge and experience and should know about local building practices as well as the habits of termites, how they work, where they're likely to be found and the signs of infestation.

To gain that level of competency, a timber pest inspector should have done at least 40 timber pest reports under appropriate direct supervision, a timber inspection course, and have some competence in units 8 and 10 of the National Pest Management Competency Standards, or equivalent experience. (The units are taught by TAFE and other registered providers; units 8 and 10 deal specifically with inspecting, reporting and controlling timber pests.)

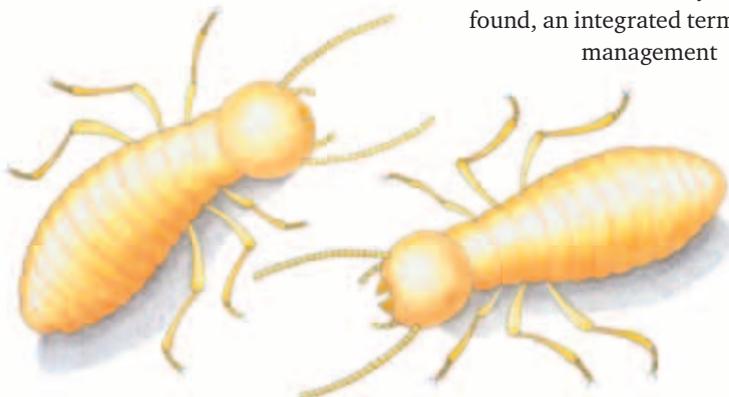
The practice, however, doesn't always reflect the theory. Although training of pest managers is based on national competency units, licensing is state-based, and the states and territories have adopted different minimum requirements. Licensing is usually the responsibility of the state's health department or occupational health and safety body and, to the chagrin of many in the industry, is largely concerned with safety matters rather than with knowledge about pests.

In most states, to get a licence, pest managers must have done a minimum of three basic units (5, 6 and 18) or equivalent. Only in Queensland and WA are units 8 and 10 also required for fully licensed timber pest managers. However, most insurers make units 8 and 10 a requirement for professional indemnity cover on termite work (see *Insurance*, page 20).

So, instead of just checking their licence, ask the pest inspector what experience they have in timber pest management. Having done units 8 and 10 is a good indicator, but experience is important too. It's generally thought that it takes at least two years' training to begin to understand termite behaviour. So if the pest manager lacks formal qualifications but has been doing the job for many years, ask them to detail their experience with wood-destroying insects.

SAFER PEST CONTROL

The CHOICE Guide to Safer Pest Control, by Paul Rogers, is full of information on how to protect your home from common household and garden pests using non-toxic methods. See page 48 for how to order it.



PESTCERT

To help address the problems of sometimes inadequate licensing requirements, the industry recently established PestCert, a professional accreditation program aimed at raising standards in the pest control industry and improving its reputation.

To gain accreditation, pest managers must demonstrate, among other things, that they've had appropriate training, which could mean higher levels of competency than most states require for licensing purposes. They must also commit themselves to regularly updating their skills and knowledge, a requirement which addresses some concerns in the industry that licences are reissued virtually automatically, without the need for professional development, if the pest manager has held a licence for a number of years.

While the accreditation scheme is aimed at all licensed pest managers, not all in the industry are backing the program, disagreeing with the concept of PestCert determining their training needs. Accreditation costs \$145 per individual, but the cost can rise considerably (to \$500–\$1000, depending on the level of training required) if pest managers lack formal qualifications and need training and assessment to demonstrate their relevant knowledge and skills.

PestCert is an initiative of the major industry association (AEPMA), which also funded its establishment, together with a number of manufacturers of pest control chemicals. It's expected to be fully operational, and governed independently, by the time this article is published. To check which pest managers in your area are PestCert accredited, go to www.pestcert.com.au or phone (07) 3390 5228. But keep in mind that lack of accreditation may well be due to reasons other than lack of skill.

INDUSTRY ASSOCIATIONS

We often advise readers to choose a member of an industry association that has a complaint-handling process in place when looking for a tradesperson or the like. While that won't guarantee a thorough job,



you'll have somewhere to turn to if things go wrong. However, a word of advice is due about the pest control industry's associations.

The major industry association is the Australian Environmental Pest Managers Association (AEPMA), based in Melbourne and represented in every state and territory. AEPMA says it's willing to help people sort out a problem with one of its members if they can't solve it with the pest manager concerned.

If there's evidence a member company has transgressed its code of ethics, AEPMA says it'll take action against that company. A warning might be issued, or the company might be expelled — a drastic action that, while it does happen, isn't required often, according to AEPMA.

To find an AEPMA member, go to www.aepma.com.au or phone AEPMA on (03) 9597 0664. Bear in mind, though, that only around half of individual pest managers (and about a third of pest management businesses) are AEPMA members.

Considering it's legal to register a company with 'association' in its name, you might also come across various groups or networks of companies that may look like an industry association when searching for a pest manager online or in the Yellow Pages. However, these could be entry portals for certain groups of companies, rather than industry associations as we know them, with many different member companies.

For example, the Sydney-based Australian Pest Controllers Association (APCA) claims to be

FOUND A NEST?

If you stumble across a termite nest on your property, don't disturb it until you've determined an appropriate termite management plan with a qualified pest manager. Once sufficiently disturbed, termites may abandon the immediate area, move elsewhere and then remain undetected.



Metal termite shields, also called ant caps, don't prevent termite activity, but it's easier to spot the tubes as they cross the cap.

KEEPING TRACK

The Building Code of Australia requires that all new homes and extensions have a termite management system in place in all areas except Tasmania, where the termite risk is negligible. Homes built after July 1995 must have a 'durable notice' of treatment fixed to a prominent position in the building (near the meter box or the entrance to a crawl space), listing the method of termite management, date of installation, life expectancy (for chemical barriers) and recommended future inspections.

a “vanguard counterweight” to the dominant association and has a small and apparently highly selective membership base of around 30, spread across most states.

When you search for a local pest manager on the APCA website (www.pestcontrol.org.au), be aware that in some locations you could be limiting your options to the FUMAPEST group of companies. Our search via the ‘Find a local pest controller’ link from the APCA website directed us to a website run by FUMAPEST (www.termite.com), which only listed FUMAPEST member details for pest managers in places such as Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Canberra, to name a few.

INSURANCE

It’s very important to look for professional indemnity and public liability insurance when getting quotes. The former covers the pest manager against negligence claims arising out of inspections, quotations and treatments performed, the latter against injuries and property damage caused as a result of their work.

Choosing a pest manager who holds current insurance should increase your chances of getting a claim settled if problems arise later on. It should also improve your odds of getting a competent pest manager in the first place, as the insurer may require higher-level skills of a pest manager than the relevant licensing body does.

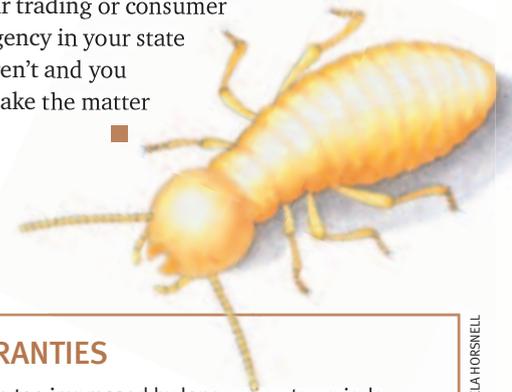
Both AEPMA and APCA require their members to have professional indemnity insurance, but most states’ licensing bodies don’t — with the exception of



Mud shelter tubes over subfloor piping are signs of termite activity.

Queensland. In fact, up to half the industry is likely to be uninsured, according to the industry’s major insurance broker. So, for your own protection, insist on insurance and on proof — ask to see certificates of currency.

And if things still go wrong in the end, despite all your research, try and sort it out with the pest manager in the first instance. He or she may well do all they can to rectify the problem and uphold their reputation. Contact AEPMA if your attempts are fruitless and the pest manager is a member, or the fair trading or consumer affairs agency in your state if they aren’t and you want to take the matter further. ■



WARRANTIES

Don’t be too impressed by long warranty periods for termite control products until you’ve read all the fine print. For example, it could require you to pay for annual check-ups to keep a 10-year warranty valid, in which case it’s hardly a real 10-year warranty. If you come across such conditions, tell the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC).



An exposed concrete slab, like the one in the top photo, acts as a physical barrier that will bring termite activity into the open. If it’s covered with shrubs and plants, as in the photo below, termites can gain concealed access to structural timbers.

DEALING WITH TERMITES

Reducing the risk

You can make a termite trap (or bait box) yourself or buy various traps via the internet. However, we think termite management is best left to the experts, as it involves more than just installing a trap in the backyard, which may or may not attract termites and could give you a false sense of security. We'd recommend getting a thorough professional inspection and then, if you want to contribute yourself, follow the pest manager's advice on improving the environmental conditions to reduce your termite risk.

Fix any moisture problems you might have around the house (inside and outside) — rectifying poor drainage, leaking pipes or inadequate ventilation should be on top of your list of things to do. Then check out your home's surrounds: shrubs or garden beds should be well clear of the building edge and not cover weepholes (the small gaps left between bricks to let water drain out). Access areas for inspection should be kept clear.

The subfloor area should also be kept clear. Don't store items that can reduce the ventilation space under the house, especially timber and other cellulose-containing materials that can attract termites. In fact, remove any wood that's in contact with the ground from near the building.

Physical barriers

If you're building a new home or doing a substantial renovation, put in appropriate physical barriers. While some can also be retrofitted, it's certainly easier to install them during construction. Physical barriers are non-toxic, permanent and, unlike chemical barriers, don't require much, if any, maintenance or renewal. They won't kill termites, but will deter them from gaining concealed access to your home.

Certain construction methods and the materials used can reduce the termite risk considerably:

- Among the commonly used physical barriers for houses built on piers or a brick course are termite shields (also called ant caps). They don't prevent termite activity but bring it into the open, as it's easier to detect their mud shelter tubes on the metal caps.

- Woven stainless steel mesh or finely graded stone particles can be installed in a concrete slab and cavity walls around pipe openings and the like so termites can't get through these concealed entry points.

- Composite systems can be chemically treated plastic or fabric sheets (they tend to be called 'physical' barriers, although they contain chemicals that'll degrade over time, unlike true physical barriers).

- Reticulation systems involve piping fitted under slabs and around the edges of a building with access points for injection of insecticide.

The Australian standard AS3660.1 includes a detailed discussion of these and other termite risk-reducing methods and barriers for new building work.

Chemical termite management

The construction period is also the best time to apply chemical soil barrier treatments under and around a concrete slab or around the building piers or footings. They create a zone of treated soil that may be effective for several years before it needs retreatment. Chemical treatments like these can still be applied after construction, but might require trenching and concrete drilling.

- Many of the chemicals approved for termite control are based on synthetic pyrethroids such as permethrin or bifenthrin. They're generally less toxic than many of the earlier insecticides containing organochlorines (which were banned in most parts of Australia in the mid 1990s) or organophosphates (chlorpyrifos is the only one in this class approved for termite control).

Newer and increasingly used classes of insecticide for treating the soil are fipronil and imidacloprid, which are less persistent in the environment but particularly effective against termites, without repelling them. This means they don't simply avoid the area, and they take the poison back to the colony.

Fipronil is currently being reviewed by the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) because a number of reports have raised concerns about the chemical's safety. Adverse effects have been reported in animals (cats and dogs treated for ticks and fleas) and in people who handled the pets (skin

irritation). At this stage, however, no adverse reactions have been reported relating to fipronil used for termite control.

- Arsenic trioxide dust, a very toxic substance and a confirmed carcinogen for humans, was commonly used in the past in termite dusting procedures. It's still approved and used for this purpose, but in recent years it's often been replaced with less toxic insect growth regulators (IGRs) such as triflumuron. This distinctive blue powder is very effective, but may take a little longer than arsenic dust to wipe out a colony.

For more details on the pesticides approved for termite control, check out APVMA's website (www.apvma.gov.au).

Monitoring and baiting stations

Monitoring and baiting is the latest trend in termite management and is a less toxic but more costly alternative. The pest manager places an unobtrusive baiting station (or more) in the vicinity of the house, usually inground. They regularly check the station, possibly reposition it and, when termites are found, add a bait and replenish it as needed. The termites take the bait back to their nest and spread it through grooming, till it eventually wipes out the colony.

Monitoring and baiting stations use very low amounts of a low-toxic IGR (such as chlorfluazuron, diflubenzuron or hexaflumuron). These chitin inhibitors affect the termites' exoskeleton and kill them by disrupting their moulting, without affecting other animals or humans. On current toxicity data, they're a relatively safe group of chemicals.

On the downside are the costs, not only for the station but for regular maintenance. And you might need a bit of good luck, as there's no guarantee the termites will find the bait. So make sure the stations are placed in prime foraging areas, such as around sprinkler systems or other areas where moisture accumulates.

And don't rely on a monitoring station as your only approach in termite management — minimise your property's risk factors as well, or use one together with other methods.