



Frequently Asked Questions about Subterranean Termite Management

*Dini M. Miller**

Introduction

Controlling an infestation of subterranean termites is expensive and complicated. Therefore, it is important to work cooperatively with the pest management professional (PMP) so he or she can halt the termite activity as quickly as possible. Different pest management companies treat termites in different ways. Sometimes information given by one company may appear to conflict with that of another. Confusing information can make it difficult for you to choose the best termite treatment for your property. To aid in the decision making process we have compiled below some of the questions (and answers) most frequently asked by homeowners about termite treatment. Also included are some quick tips on how to choose a pest management company.

Questions and Answers

1. I am buying a house and need a Wood Destroying Organism (WDO or WDI) inspection for the mortgage company. The real estate agent works regularly with a local pest control operator (PCO) who performs these inspections. I would like to go with the PCO to see what he finds. However, the real estate agent says that buyers do not attend WDO inspections. What should I do?

A new home is the largest investment that most families make. It is extremely important that you know about the condition of that home before you buy it. Having a real estate agent or the seller pick out a pest control company for the WDO inspection is like buying a used car and having the seller pick someone to test drive it for you. You should insist on hiring the pest management company yourself and on being present for the inspection. If the pest management professional

(PMP) finds a problem, arrangements can be made to secure funds for repairs or treatment during the escrow process.

2. The pest management company says that they do not see any signs of termite activity in my home right now, but they see termites outside. They say that I should have my home it treated preventatively. Should I have them do it?

That is up to you, but there are some things to consider. First, most houses are treated with a preventative barrier of liquid termiticide before they are constructed. So, if you do not have termites now, there is no way to predict when or if termites will ever infest your home. However, no liquid termiticide will last forever in the soil. Because of this limited efficacy, it is not recommended that you treat a home preventatively. Liquid treatments are disruptive and expensive, and a preventative treatment may start to deteriorate before the termites begin to infest.

By contrast, termite baits are often used preventatively. This is because they affect the foraging colony rather than defending the structure. If termites foraging outside feed on the bait they will pass it on to other members of the colony. In time there are far fewer termites (if any) to attack your home. However, baits require constant maintenance on the part of the PMP and are therefore more expensive than liquid termiticides.

Please note: neither baits nor liquid treatments have been shown to prevent termite infestation 100% of the time.

3. I have an active termite infestation. My pest management company says that I should have a liquid

*Assistant Professor, Entomology, Virginia Tech

termite treatment at my foundation and termite baits in my yard. He says one won't work without the other. Is that true?

It depends on which type of baiting system you purchase. The FirstLine Termite Baiting System by FMC integrates the use of bait stations with spot treatments of liquid termiticide to infested areas. The FirstLine system is designed to use the liquid and bait treatments together and the system would be less effective if each were used separately. The Exterra baiting system does not require a liquid termiticide treatment although a liquid can be used in addition to the bait stations. The Sentricon Termite Baiting System is designed as a stand-alone treatment. The use of liquid termiticide in combination with Sentricon bait stations is strongly discouraged.

4. The termite inspector found one small place in the wall of our house that has termites. Instead of treating that one spot with liquid termiticide, he insists that he needs to treat the whole house. Is that necessary?

Yes, because termites move. The termites that are infesting the wall are only a few members of a much larger colony in the soil. Treating the wall will only kill the infesting termites. The remaining thousands foraging in the soil are still a threat. When only a small area is treated, the termites may avoid the treatment and infest the home in a new location. Therefore, the PMP wants to protect the entire structure at once and reduce the chances of having to re-treat.

5. I just bought a previously owned home. Although the inspection indicated no termite activity, I want to have it treated to prevent termites. One pest control company said that it is illegal to treat my house when they found no termite activity. Is that true?

Yes and no. Most liquid termiticide labels indicate that the product cannot be used unless there is termite evidence. The pesticide label is the law. However, all new homes are pre-treated (graded soil treated with termiticide before the slab is poured) regardless of termite evidence. This is also the law. So, interpretation of the label, in this case, is up to the PMP because their company would suffer the legal consequences of any misapplication. In general, however, preventative applications of liquid termiticide are not recommended for existing homes (see question 2 above).

Termite baiting is an option for preventative treatment. The labels for baiting systems do not require pest evidence before application. Why? Because none of the toxic bait material is placed in the stations unless there is a termite attack.

6. I found a rotten spot in our siding. When I replaced it, I found subterranean termites. I can't afford a professional termite treatment and want to treat them myself. Can I?

There are do-it-yourself termite baits that you can buy at home improvement stores. However, these products have not been proven to prevent or eliminate termite infestation. At best they may kill some termites. Yet, they may only provide a false sense of security. All other bait systems and liquid termiticide products are labeled for professional use only and cannot be purchased by homeowners.

Please consider that termite treatment is very labor intensive and complicated. Therefore, it should only be performed by professionals with the proper training and application equipment. Treatment is expensive but the costs should be considered relative to the consequences of failing to protect your most valuable investment. Subterranean termites cause millions of dollars in damage each year. So it is in the best interest of your home to call a professional when you experience a subterranean termite infestation.

7. I had my house treated for termites. Is it really necessary to pay for an annual inspection?

It is always a good idea to have your home inspected for a couple of years after having a liquid termiticide treatment. Trying to apply a complete liquid barrier that is free of gaps (untreated areas) is like trying to force a blanket under a house. Many areas are inaccessible and construction or landscaping features get in the way. Even the most conscientious pest management professional will have difficulty applying a perfect termiticide barrier the first time. Controlling an infestation is further complicated by the fact that termites only need a 1/16th inch gap through the treatment to gain access to the building. For this reason, it is important to keep up your warranty for at least the first few years after treatment.

Termite baiting is an ongoing process and does not end with controlling the infestation. Therefore, the annual inspection will come with your baiting program's annual renewal.

8. The pest management company says that they guarantee their treatment. What should I expect from their guarantee?

You will find that very few liquid termiticide guarantees or warranties will cover damage to your home. Some do cover damage but there are often many stipulations to that coverage. More often the pest management company provides a warranty which covers re-treatment only.

Basically if the home is treated for termites and subsequent activity is found in the home within the time covered by the warranty, the pest management company will return and retreat the infested area.

By contrast baiting systems will often come with a full wood repair warranty, some covering up to \$250,000.00 in damage. Bait systems are so much more expensive and demand such a high level of cooperation between the PMP and the homeowner that the repair warranty is added to create additional value for the bait customer. PMPs have also realized that by providing the damage warranty for their bait systems they are better able to compete with the significantly less expensive liquid treatments on the market.

Tips for Choosing a Pest Management Company

As a final note, you should be very selective when choosing a pest management company to treat your termite problem. Pest management like all business is a joint venture between the company and the customer. Be prepared to cooperate fully with the pest management professional you select. Here are a few tips for purchasing pest management services wisely:

1. Shop around for the best service at a reasonable price. Avoid companies that price their services

significantly lower than others because the quality will be questionable.

2. Select a company that answers all of your questions to your satisfaction and is willing to show and explain your termite evidence to you. It is sometimes helpful to get information about termite treatment from the internet and then discuss it with the PMPs. But remember that not all internet information is accurate so use your discussion to help you evaluate the PMPs knowledge of the different termite treatment methods.
3. Read the proposed contract carefully and find out as much as you can about each of the suggested treatments. Know exactly what the company will do and put under warranty. Ask the salesman to interpret any part of the contract that you do not understand.
4. Check out the company's service record with the Better Business Bureau.

References:

Koehler, P. G., D. E. Short, and W. H. Kern. Pest In and Around the Florida Home. University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS No. SP 134. Gainesville FL. 1998.

Disclaimer

Trade and brand names are used only for the purpose of information and the sponsors do not guarantee nor warrant the standards of the product, nor do they imply approval of the product to the exclusion of others which may also be suitable.