

A Guide to DIY Home Inspections for Insect Pests and Dry Rot

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Most homes are inspected for structural defects, as well as “pests and dry rot”, when homes are sold. The mortgage bank making the home loan generally insists on an inspection by a licensed home inspector, and complete inspections can cost around \$500. Unfortunately, most homes are not inspected again until the next time they are sold. This is indeed unfortunate because many potentially expensive pest and/or rot problems could be discovered in time to fix them *before* they become unmanageable, *if* inspections were done once or twice a year.

The following Guide will walk you through a simple inspection routine that the average homeowner can do themselves and save the cost of hiring a professional inspector. Do this once or twice a year (winter and summer, for example) and you'll go a long way toward protecting your home against the damage these pests can cause. The inspections themselves should take less than an hour.

The primary insect pests you are looking for are **carpenter ants**, **termites** and **powderpost beetles** as well as **water infiltration** and wetness allowing **dry rot fungi** to grow. The **tools** you'll need are pretty simple: **work clothes** because you might get dirty, **work gloves**, a good **flashlight**, I like the big, “million candle power” spot lights, and a **heavy screwdriver** for tapping on wood.

If you are not familiar with these potential pests you may want to first review the relevant pages at [LivingWithBugs.com](http://www.livingwithbugs.com). Use the following links:

carpenter ants: http://www.livingwithbugs.com/carp_ant.html;

termites: <http://www.livingwithbugs.com/termite.html>;

powderpost beetles: <http://www.livingwithbugs.com/powder.html>;

dry rot fungi: <http://www.livingwithbugs.com/dry-rot.html>.

do it yourself (DIY) pest control: <http://www.livingwithbugs.com/diy.html>

Disclaimer: Annual inspections for insect pests and dry rot will not guarantee that you'll never have damage from these pests, and nothing in this Guide should be construed as a guarantee. While you can do annual inspections yourself these should not replace inspections performed by a licensed, professional home inspector prior to real estate sales.

Print and use this Guide to document your inspections for insect pest and dry rot damage. Date the form and put it in a safe place for future use. This form has room for 10 different inspection dates and you can copy or print the form as many times as you like.

Inspection Form

Date of last inspection: _____; _____; _____;
_____; _____; _____;
_____; _____; _____;

Inspect exterior for carpenter ants



wingless and winged carpenter ants

The purpose of this inspection is to look for **carpenter ants** that may have established trails between your home and their foraging grounds outside. If you find trails it may mean that ants have built a nest in your home and the ants you find are transporting food and water back to the nest.

First, walk slowly around the building's exterior. Do your inspections in the **morning** or **evening** during **warm months** of the year. *Remove all vegetation that touches any part of the structure* including branches overhanging the roof. This vegetation blocks your view and it provides an easy bridge that ants can use to bypass standard treatments. Look for trails of ants on exterior walls or on anything attached to the structure like decks. If there is a nest inside carpenter ants will likely be found moving toward or away from the home. If ants are found, collect a few for identification. Don't be concerned about ants you find outdoors that are not moving in a direct way (trailing) toward or away from the house.

If ants are found trailing into or out of structure, describe location of trails.

What type of ant was found and where was the identification done?

Inspect exterior for water damage

The main reason for this inspection is to check for water seepage into the structure from **saturated** soil. *Forget about insect damage for the moment; water*, whether it comes from a leaky pipe, clogged gutter, or from ground water, is the biggest preventable threat to your home. This inspection can be done in winter or summer but if you only do one inspection a year do this one when **soils are wet**. Check foundation walls for water stains indicating that water is wicking up from the soil. If evidence of saturated soil is found, steps should be taken to reduce this water by improving drainage, fixing gutters, and so forth.

If evidence of saturated soil or exterior water damage is found, describe location.

Inspect crawl space for water, dry rot, powderpost beetles and termites**

If your home has an accessible **crawl space**** do this inspection during the **wet months**. You will be able to check for water leakage through foundation walls that may not be evident during the dry months. Also, check for **termite mud shelter tubes** on foundation walls, support walls and posts. Inspect anything solid that spans between the soil and the structure for these shelter tubes. See our **termite** article (URL address above) for more information about mud shelter tubes. Use the handle of a heavy screwdriver to tap on any structural wood that appears damaged, or wet, in order to test for dry rot. Dry, structurally sound wood will “ring” when struck while wet and/or rotted wood will not. Finally check for **powderpost beetle** emergence holes in floor joists and support beams, especially if you live in a wet climate, for example near the coast (see powderpost beetle article; URL address above).

If water seepage is found in the crawl space, describe location.

If evidence of termites, powderpost beetles or dry rot was found, describe location.

Inspect basement for water infiltration and termites**

If your home has a **basement**** do an inspection for water infiltration through the foundation and termite activity during **wet months**. Examine the inside foundation walls for water condensate and liquid water. Look for mold growth as this is evidence of a wet surface. Also, look for failing paint as this is another indication of water infiltration.

Check for **termite** activity. Termites may construct mud shelter tubes to extend their colony from the outside soil to structural wood of the home. These mud tubes can be built on foundation walls and posts and will look like tree branches or roots that are made of soil particles. Also, tap on support posts with your screwdriver to check for internal dry rot or termite damage.

If areas of water infiltration are found, describe location.

If termite activity is found, describe location.

Inspect home interior for leaky pipes and insect activity

This is the least important inspection but unfortunately it is the only one that most people do, if they do any at all! Check under sinks for water damage and evidence of insect activity. Check the attic if it is accessible for insect activity and water damage from a leaky roof.

General notes for next time:

Repairs and pest control

If you uncover any evidence of water damage it should be repaired as soon as possible because it will only get worst over time. Structural wood that is under load will eventually fail. You must find the source of water and eliminate it as well as repair the damage. Most times this repair should be done by a licensed contractor. Termites, carpenter ants and powderpost beetles can sometimes be treated yourself. See the articles cited above for information about treating these pests.

****Different types of home construction**

Homes are generally built over a **basement**, **crawl space** or **concrete slab**. The different methods of construction can influence the type of insect pests that you experience in your home. **Basements** are completely enclosed spaces with, usually, a concrete floor and a standard eight-foot-high ceiling. They often have windows as well. Basements can be waterproofed, and even heated, and hence tend to be somewhat drier and less hospitable to some insect pests. Dry basements also protect the underside of the first floor from water damage.

Crawl space construction is where the house is built over bare soil that is often only a few feet or less away from the framing wood of the first floor. There are no windows in crawl space construction; instead, screened vents are added to the foundation wall to vent this space. Crawl spaces are unheated and usually damp. The bare soil of the crawl space should be **covered with heavy plastic** to reduce moisture. Never close the foundation vents except in the coldest months of winter. Crawl spaces are great places for **ants**, **termites**, **silverfish**, **spiders**, and **mice**. Because of the moisture in crawl spaces you should check the first-floor wood framing for mold and moisture damage at least once a year.

Unfortunately, some careless homebuilders bury wood construction debris or tree stumps in the soil of the crawl space, or under concrete slabs (see below), because this is cheaper than hauling it away. Most builders would never do this—and the practice is

banned in most areas—but it does still happen. This buried wood can become infested with **subterranean termites** which will eventually spread into the rest of the home. If you are building a home or purchasing a recently built one, be sure to ask the builder about their disposal practices.

The third type of construction is where the house, or a part of it, is built on a **concrete slab**. The slab is usually insulated and waterproofed from the underlying soil, but it has holes in it for utility pipes. The concrete slab serves as the framing for the first floor, so there is no wood framing that can be damaged by moisture. If the utility holes are properly sealed, this type of construction prevents most insects from entering the home from below.

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