



The truth about termites



Termites are a concern in the Australian building industry, but separating popular beliefs from hard facts can sometimes be difficult. Jerry Tyrrell offers his thoughts on the best ways to reduce risk.

Some fears help us avoid injury or death. For instance, we know to take cover in lightning storms. We shouldn't touch spiders and snakes. It is stupid to stand on loose soil at cliff edges. And we instinctively know jumping out of a tree 4m off the ground is really dangerous.

Sound science and finding out the real facts is also very important. Despite all our fear there has only been one death from spiders in Australia since 1983. Sharks are really scary too, but there is only slightly more than one person killed by sharks every year. There are a lot more people dying from bee stings and

The truth about termites

Porkies from the pest control industry	The truth
Termites attack one in three properties.	This ratio is distorted because it includes termites in fences, timber in ground and trees. The actual risk ¹ of active termites or serious damage to your building is less than 1%.
You must have chemical treatment.	The National Construction Code does not require chemical treatment for new building work where concrete, masonry, steel and termite resistant timbers are used.
Termites can penetrate concrete slabs.	They cannot penetrate the reinforced slabs your engineer requires you to construct.
You never know when termites are attacking.	Yes you do. You can learn enough to save money and expensive repairs – get good advice from reputable pest control companies and see the Pest Pack ² .
Chemicals stop termites.	No they don't. Every termite damaged building I have assessed had a previous chemical or graded stone barrier.

swallowing ballpoint pen caps.

Since the mid-1990s the pest control industry has had access to accurate science on how to limit termite risk in their buildings. Trouble is they did not 'fess up' to the people who need to know

– architects, contractors and their clients.

I don't intend to dwell on what hasn't happened. The real deal is telling consumers how to save money and limit the risk of ever-facing financial loss from termites.

Leading the industry

One of Australia's largest home builders no longer spends \$1,200 per home on chemical reticulation systems which used to condemn their client to costly ongoing five year charges. And worse, it condemns the local water table to periodic toxic top ups.

It was not easy for Eden Brae Homes. They decided to use Hyne T2 framing timbers. Then they had to push their roof tile supplier to use treated battens. And finally, their stair supplier gave in and sourced Class 1 hardwood for stringers and risers. Council officers agreed and supported this overdue change. Yippee! Hooray for their customers!

The formula is...

Oh yes ... I forgot to tell you. I had to get my builder's licence again because I have to give advice in different states. So I can truthfully say 'when I build':

1. I'd be really careful about removing old stumps and any timber in the soil under the building footprint.
 2. I'd use H2 or T2 treated timber or steel frames.
 3. Concrete floors are a good termite barrier and also a good thermal mass.
 4. I'd leave the slab edge visible where possible because this is a real good way to catch unexpected termite entry.
 5. I'd never worry if termites enter the building because they can never do expensive damage.
 6. I'd install baits if I was at all anxious and wanted early warning of any infestation.
- So ... no chemicals, less cost, healthier, less future cost, less worry. ■

Please email me any thoughts or experiences at jwtyrrell@tyrrells.com

Jerry Tyrrell is founder of the Institute of Building Consultants and co-founder of Tyrrells Property Inspections. He has more than 39 years' experience as a labourer, tradesman, contractor, architect, mediator, building consultant and author. He chaired the Timber Pest Standard and was a committee member of the Termite Management Standard.

Consumers should take the 'bait'

Baits are like a termite early warning system – you find the termites before they do expensive damage.

I was initially appalled by the high cost of some termite baiting systems. And I am disappointed with the pest control industry peddling high cost baiting programs when it is often better for the consumer to invest in removing timber built into ground, treating colonies in trees or even demolishing and rebuilding structures which were really dodgy in the first place.

The best bait that I have seen is made by Exterra. These are clever, durable devices if you do have an older house built with untreated timber. Or for a new building if you just want peace of mind.

If termites take the bait, an Exterra approved pest control professional will apply an insect growth regulator to eradicate the colony – and the really good ones will regularly monitor your house until they are sure the termite risk is low.



Next Issue: Anatomy of building

¹Building Failure Report no 1 – an analysis of defects in over 3,000 properties in Australia.

²Download the Pest Pack – a consumer's guide to do-it-yourself timber pest inspections. Email request to jwtyrrell@tyrrells.com