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Ants in Houses

Injury

Many types of ants may be found in houses. Some are actual household pests damaging wooden structures, or undermining slabs or patio stones. Others are more of a nuisance – for example, when they wander in to look for something to eat or drink. They get into foods and feed on them. Food contamination can also occur and may result in allergic reactions by certain sensitive people.

Some of the ants that may be found in houses include: Carpenter ants (*Camponotus* spp.); Little black ant (*Monomorium minimum*); Pharaoh ant (*Monomorium pharaonis*); Odorous house ant (*Tapinoma sessile*); Acrobat ant (*Crematogaster* spp.); Cornfield ant (*Lasius* spp.); Yellow ant (*Acanthomyops* spp.); Thief ant (*Solenopsis* spp.); and Pavement ant (*Tetramorium caespitum*).

Description

Ants have three body regions (head, thorax and abdomen or gaster) distinctly defined by narrow constrictions at the neck and waist. They also have elbowed antennae.

Ants are social insects that live in colonies. Most colonies contain three distinct castes: the queen, fertile males and sterile female workers. There may also be different forms of each caste. Workers are wingless, but at mating time swarms of fertile females and males are produced; these are usually winged.

Life History

Adult winged males and females emerge from their cocoons and eventually leave the nests. Emergence of large numbers of ants (swarming) usually occurs at certain times during spring or fall. Often this is the only time we notice the ants at all. Males seek out females in the swarm; mating usually occurs in the air. Males die soon after the mating flight, while the mated female starts a new colony of which she will be queen. She removes her wings, forms a small cell and lays eggs. The young queen tends the eggs and feeds the larvae that hatch from them by regurgitating food. Some of the food comes from the breakdown of her wing muscles, but if there is a shortage of food, a few of the larvae may be eaten. Except for some types of primitive hunting ants, the queen does not leave the cell to forage for food.

The surviving larvae mature, form pupae with or without spun cocoons, depending on the species, and finally emerge as adult ants. The first workers are dwarfs, called nanites. When the workers emerge, the queen retires as nursemaid and concentrates on the job of egg production. The nanites take over, caring for the next batch of eggs: they hunt for food outside the nest and do the job of rearing larvae. Under the nanites' care, the next brood of larvae become normal-sized workers. Adult workers may live for weeks or up to two years or more. Queens have been known to live for as long as 20 years.

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After a colony is well established, some of the larvae develop into reproductive males and females that will take off in the mating flight.

Management

Ants are frequently attracted inside homes by greasy or sweet food. Once inside, they will feed on many different kinds of food including meats, dairy products, pastries, fruits, animal fats and vegetable oils, as well as dead or live insects. To discourage them, store food in tight containers. Thoroughly clean areas where ants occur or gather. Try to locate the ants' nests. Note the surfaces they crawl over and where the ants are coming from and where they go after feeding. This will help you determine if the ants are inside, or coming in from outside. If they are entering from outdoors, seal their route of entry with caulking compound.

It is not always possible to locate the nests – inside, ants often nest between floor and subfloor, in walks, behind baseboards, beneath cracked basement floors, in decaying or rotting wood (often near leaky plumbing) or even in piles of papers. In some cases, removing part of a wall or floor may even be necessary to find the ants, but this is not always possible to do.

You may treat nests you find indoors with an insecticide. Ant traps that contain borates or other materials and a feeding attractant may be effective if they are a major food source for the colony. It may take more than six or eight weeks for these baits to have an effect. If the insects persist, you may use an insecticide to spot treat their entry points. You may use a household formulation of Baygon, cyfluthrin, deltamethrin, permethrin, silica gel-pyrethrum combination or resmethrin. Many of these products are in ready-to-use containers. A small paintbrush may be helpful in treating areas where drift could be a problem. Follow the manufacturers' directions carefully when using any pesticide. Consider hiring a professional pesticide applicator in extremely persistent cases.

NEVER USE INSECTICIDES ON FOOD PREPARATION SURFACES OR IN AREAS FREQUENTED BY CHILDREN OR PETS.

If nests are out of doors, treatment is usually not necessary. Outside, ants are usually beneficial because they help to clean up the environment and aerate the soil. If shallow ant nests are undermining patio stones, locate and eliminate the nesting sites. You may apply insecticidal soap, Baygon, cyfluthrin, deltamethrin, permethrin or resmethrin as a last resort.

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The information on pest management for New York State contained in this publication is dated January, 2006. The user is responsible for obtaining the most up-to-date pest management information. Contact any Cornell Cooperative Extension county office or PMEP (<http://pmep.cce.cornell.edu/>), the Cornell Cooperative Extension pesticide information website. The information herein is no substitute for pesticide labeling. The user is solely responsible for reading and following manufacturer's labeling and instructions