

## FACT FILE 6: Termites

### Termites cannot eat steel.

To take the first and most basic step towards minimising the risk you face from the termite menace, for the lifetime of your home, you need to impose an absolute limit on the amount of damage they can inflict. Achieve this by making sure your home has a steel frame. Don't accept alternatives.

All households are exposed to a risk posed by termites. Just two things determine how great that level of risk is. The first is the likelihood that termites will enter your home; the second is the amount of damage they can wreak before detection and eradication.

The likelihood that termites will enter your home varies with factors such as region, construction type, materials used, expertise of the builder and vigilance of the householder, but is far higher than generally recognised! The incidence of termite attack appears to be increasing everywhere and has reached disturbing levels. Conventional termite barriers fail for a variety of reasons, and there is convincing evidence that these failures are on the increase. Often it's only a matter of time. If you choose to build or buy a house with an untreated termite-susceptible timber frame, automatically your level of risk will be high, because termites could seriously damage the entire frame. Usually the first sign of termite attack is within the home to items such as doorframes or skirting boards. With a non-resistant frame, by then it is too late. It has already been attacked, and if, as often happens, termites have destroyed most of the frame, they have for practical purposes destroyed your house, because the frame supports the house. Often the result is a condemned building, or expensive, time-consuming, and disruptive repair work at least. Do not accept this risk. The cost of rebuilding or restoration could be a financial disaster. Also, bear in mind that termites are not the only organisms that attack timber. Borers and fungal rot cause far more damage than is generally realised, and barriers cannot keep them out.

The Building Code of Australia allows a steel-framed house to be built without any extra defence against termites. Depending on factors such as the local environment, style of building (for example one with an elevated sub-floor system of steel), and personal circumstances, you may decide you don't need a barrier, because your frame will be safe and potential damage will be moderate. You may judge this option to be an "acceptable risk".

Owners however have two very low-risk options available to them:

1. A steel-framed house, with non-structural components of termite-resistant materials. In this case no barrier is necessary.
2. A steel-framed house, plus a termite management system that conforms at least to the minimum requirements of the relevant Australian Standards (AS 3660 series).

Builders are traditionalists. Most have been trained as carpenters, and prefer working with timber because of their long-standing familiarity with it. Also, under the so-called "whole of house protection" policy espoused by some state government agencies many will not build a steel-framed house without a termite barrier, because of the chance of termites damaging non-structural parts of the building. Builders have been told that if this happens they will be held responsible for fixing such damage. Because of this, many take the view that if they have to install a barrier with a steel frame anyway, why bother building in steel. Some will even try to dissuade you from building with a steel frame but don't be talked out of it.

NASH, in line with the Australian Standard (AS 3660 series), strongly recommends regular competent inspections of buildings for any signs of termites. Termite barriers don't stop termites. They force their earthen leads into the open where they can be seen. Steel frames don't attract termites, but they will not stop some species. There is no substitute for vigilance, and being well informed.

NASH believes that the cost of inspection for termites should be lower for steel-framed dwellings than for timber framed dwellings. This is because the frame is generally inaccessible, but being inaccessible doesn't matter if the frame is built of steel. Bear in mind also that pest inspectors do not accept liability for the condition of concealed members, simply because they are so difficult to inspect properly.

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