



Highlights: Pest Control Services

At some point, most homeowners will find themselves sharing their abode with creepy crawlies of some kind. Before you hire an exterminator, find out what you can do on your own. You should be able to cure most pest problems without hiring a service. When you do need professional help, *Bay Area Consumers' Checkbook* (www.checkbook.org) rates local pest control services for quality and price.

Ants

- If you can locate the ants' nest, a quick way to get rid of ants is to spray it with insecticide. If the nest is outside, you can find it by following the ants' movements to and from food sources.
- If the nest is within walls or otherwise inaccessible, cut off the paths ants follow into and out of your house or kitchen by caulking cracks and crevices. Store sweets in closed containers. Thoroughly clean up grease and spills. Don't store garbage indoors. Eliminate indoor nesting sites, including potted plants.
- For a quick fix, try ant spray. Apply it along the lower part of window frames and around doors; outdoors on pipes, posts, and pillars leading from the ground to the house; and into cracks in baseboards, walls, and floors, and around sinks, bathtubs, toilets, and kitchen cupboards.
- Consider using baits. Place baits where ants can easily find them but kids and pets won't.
- Carpenter ants require a different plan. They're drawn to damp wood, so you'll need to prevent water from accumulating on your house. Clean gutters and downspouts, and cut tree limbs and shrubs that overhang the house.

Cockroaches

- Keep your home as clean as possible and eliminate access to your kitchen and other likely infestation sites by applying caulk to seal cracks and other entry points.
- Eliminate leaks and pooling in kitchens, bathrooms, crawlspaces, and basements.
- Lay either sticky traps or so-called "bait stations." Sticky traps likely won't solve an infestation, but baits might eradicate a small one. Bait stations dispense slow-acting poisons, so results may take a week.
- Boric acid is another effective roach killer. You slowly blow it into cracks and crevices, or lightly spread it in areas where humans won't come into contact with it. Keep the dust dry and undisturbed.
- You can try a chemical insecticide spray or dust. But because the effectiveness of these poisons is fairly short-term, your infestation may return when eggs hatch (egg cases are often resistant to pyrethroids).

Mice and rats

- Start by eliminating places for them to live and sources of food.
- Close off all openings to your home more than 1/4 inch in size through foundation cracks, around or under door and window frames, and elsewhere with sheet metal, heavy screen, cement mortar, etc.
- Then, you may be able to bring a small infestation under control with traps; a wood-base snap trap is as good as any. Peanut butter is ideal for baiting traps.
- Place traps perpendicular to walls, with trigger ends toward the walls so rodents will run over them.
- Although trapping may eliminate a small infestation, large problems will probably require poison baits, which are usually anticoagulants. If you use poison baits—even the relatively safe types—place them out of reach of pets and children, and don't forget where they are.

Carpenter bees

- You know you have carpenter bees when you see them or by telltale sawdust where they have been drilling into wood. A single bee won't cause much damage, but the broods that follow will expand the tunnel and may cause structural damage.

- To prevent carpenter bees from nesting, cover exposed wood with paint or varnish, or metal or fiberglass materials. To kill the bees, carefully apply an insecticidal spray or dust designed for flying insects, complying with the safety precautions on the label. Alternatively, close off the nest or replace the damaged wood. Apply a temporary repellent such as almond oil or almond essence around the nest.

Bedbugs

- Bedbugs are notoriously difficult to control. Even small infestations may require calling in a pro.
- Sanitation won't prevent bedbugs or get rid of them. But since clutter provides them with perfect hiding spots, the first step toward eliminating a bedbug infestation is to clear out everything in the room but the furniture. Put items in airtight plastic bags and seal them before you leave the room.
- Thoroughly vacuum beds and carpets. Remove outlet and lighting switch plates, and vacuum the dust and debris inside (after you've shut off the breaker). Pull carpeting off its tack strips around the edge of the room so you can vacuum baseboards and under carpet. Bring the vacuum bag outdoors ASAP.
- Wash everything that's washable in the hottest water it can take (120°F or higher), and dry at the hottest setting possible. Have carpets and rugs professionally cleaned.
- Take on any remaining bugs. Professionals most commonly apply pyrethroids and isopropyl alcohol. Even one treatment should knock an infestation to manageable levels; and since its dehydrating effect also affects eggs, repeated treatments, along with washing and vacuuming, should eliminate them.

Pantry moths

- Pantry moths are not dangerous, but they are a nuisance and hard to eliminate. You'll meet them when you open a kitchen cabinet or pantry door, and they flutter out and around the food. As they breed, their larvae infest foods such as cereal, flour, and grains.
- Thoroughly clean the affected area. Seal food in plastic bags and discard them outside in the trash. Vacuum all cracks where grains might have spilled. If you are moving and have had a problem with pantry moths, be careful not to introduce the pests into your new home.
- Don't bother hiring a pro for these. Clean and then clean again if moths come back.

What to do when you need a pro ...

- Choose your pest control company carefully. Some outfits were rated "superior" overall by 90 percent or more of their surveyed customers, but other companies received such favorable ratings from fewer than 60 percent of their surveyed customers.
- Prices for household pest treatments vary widely. Checkbook's price shoppers found that while some companies charge \$150 or less for a single treatment for cockroaches, others charge \$250 or more. Some companies require customers to sign up for long-term contracts that cost \$400 or more. But for most pests, a single treatment done well should suffice.
- For household pest work, you can often get price quotes over the phone or via email, and companies that will not quote by phone will almost always come to your house to give free estimates.
- Don't assume you have to pay more to get good work: Checkbook's evaluation revealed no relationship between prices charged for pest control work and customer satisfaction.
- If you suspect you have a termite problem, get several inspections because some companies have been known to recommend treatment when there is neither an active infestation nor serious threat of one.
- Check the guarantees offered by companies you are considering. Will they pay for pest damages or just re-treatment? How often will they come over to inspect at no extra charge? And what do you have to do to keep the guarantee in effect?
- If you need termite service, check whether the company will send a technician certified as a wood-destroying-object inspector who has met training requirements and passed a California state test.

Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.