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Highlights: Pest Control

It's almost inevitable that at some point homeowners will find themselves sharing their abode with creepy crawlies of some kind. **Puget Sound Consumers' CHECKBOOK** magazine and www.checkbook.org rate 40 local pest control firms for quality and price and offer helpful advice to those with uninvited houseguests who have checked in—and aren't checking out.

According to CHECKBOOK's latest evaluations of pest-control companies:

- Quality of work varies. Of the 40 pest control operations rated, 15 were rated "superior" for "overall performance" by 80 percent or more of their surveyed customers. On the other hand, five of the companies received such favorable ratings from only half or fewer of their surveyed customers.
- Costs for pest-control treatments vary widely. For example, for a job treating cockroaches, one company's price was \$175 for an initial treatment with a 90-day guarantee and another company's price was \$439 for an initial treatment with no guarantee.

The best way to save money is to avoid unneeded service. To do that, CHECKBOOK recommends that consumers:

- Not enter into a contract for expensive pest control work without getting several inspections and proposals. This is especially true of termite work, where some firms have a history of recommending treatment when there is no active infestation or serious threat of one.
- Ask each firm about alternative treatment strategies. A firm's standard approach may not fit a specific consumer's preferences with regard to how quickly the pest problem must be solved, cost, and exposure to chemicals.
- Be wary of entering long-term contracts. For many household pests like ants or cockroaches, a single well-done treatment will do the job. Many firms will offer to provide free re-treatments if needed within a 30-day or 60-day period. Consumers are likely to save money by taking a modest chance that they will have to pay for a later follow-up visit or two rather than contracting up front for long-term treatment.
- For termites, consider paying each year to have a guarantee extended for a year or two after treatment. After that, if there has been no further evidence of infestation, most consumers will save by letting the guarantee lapse. It is enough to keep an eye out for termite signs (described in the CHECKBOOK article) and invite a firm out every couple of years for a free inspection/estimate.
- Learn what they can do without professional help. Except for termites, most pest infestations can be cured with a modest amount of effort by the average homeowner.

Whatever firm a consumer hires, CHECKBOOK advises trying to get one of the firm's best technicians for the work. Ask for a "certified pest control applicator." "Certified applicators" have successfully completed training and passed a state-required test. Many firms send out "registered technicians" who are not certified applicators. If a homeowner likes an applicator a firm has sent, CHECKBOOK advises making a note of the name so the same applicator can be requested for any needed future visits.

CHECKBOOK recommends consumers take the following steps to protect their families, their pets, and the environment from unnecessary risks from pest-control chemicals:

- Try to avoid getting pests. Improve sanitation, close off cracks and other small points of entry from the outside, reduce or eliminate excess moisture, and cut off access to foods. Such simple environmental adjustments can significantly reduce pest populations, reducing the need for chemical pesticides.
- Before pesticides are used, learn about safety precautions and possible health effects. If using a professional, ask questions up front, such as what should be removed from the treatment area, how long the house must be vacant after application, and how long the chemicals will be potent. Be skeptical about safety claims and insist that safety precautions be followed. Many chemicals that were widely used just ten years ago are no longer in use because of safety concerns.
- Learn about alternative pest control strategies. Be aware that—
 - Some chemicals are safer than others. For example, treatment for cockroaches with boric acid may eliminate the need for more dangerous chemicals.
 - Using poisonous baits, as opposed to spray treatments, has become an increasingly popular approach for dealing with pests. Using baits keeps poisons confined, and can be very effective long-term because many of the bait formulations work by getting the insects to take the poison back to a nest where other insects are killed.
 - In the termite field, however, there are pros and cons of bait systems as compared to the traditional use of insecticide barriers around a structure. Companies offering termite bait systems ask consumers to sign up for regular monthly or quarterly visits for as long as they want protection to continue. That results in considerable annual cost to the consumer.
 - Be sure that pesticide labels are followed carefully and that pesticide is always stored out of reach of children and pets. If a professional will be doing the work, find out exactly what chemicals are being applied and have the operator provide a copy of the label for any pesticide used.

The media may cite selected examples of top-rated pest control companies, as shown in the new issue of Puget Sound Consumers' CHECKBOOK, and CHECKBOOK's editors are available for interviews. Please call Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 to schedule.

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