

# Integrated Pest Management of Ants

Columns of ants marching through our homes are a common problem in California. Many parents react by pulling out a can of ant spray to get rid of them. But there are risks to using these products—and, fortunately, there are safer and more effective ways of reducing the number of ants in our homes. Integrated pest management (IPM) is an approach to preventing ant invasions and reducing pesticide use through identification, prevention and monitoring of ants in your home. When ants are a problem, IPM strategies use a combination of pest management practices that have the least possible risk of pesticide exposure to families.

## Ant characteristics and habits

Ants are usually found where they can find food and water to take back to their nests. Most ants commonly found in California are not a serious threat to human health or property, and they may help with control of other pests like fleas, caterpillars, and termites.

## Managing ants in the home

Spraying pesticides may kill the ants you can see, but spraying is not an effective way to keep ants out of your home. More importantly, pesticide residues can build up in the dust on floors where people may be exposed. Young children are especially vulnerable because they spend a lot of time on the floor, where they may breathe or swallow these residues; pesticides can also be absorbed through the skin. There is increasing concern about the effects of these pesticides on the health and development of young children. Ant control should focus on good sanitation and home maintenance in order to avoid routine spraying with pesticides.

Ant management requires continuous effort. The goal is to reduce ants in our homes. Do not try to completely eliminate ants from your yard – it is not necessary and may harm the environment.

There are several steps to ant control:

### Keep ants out of indoor settings:

- When you see ant trails in your home, try to follow the ants to where they are entering your house. Caulk cracks around foundations or openings that provide entry from

outside (pay special attention to where wires and pipes enter the building, as these are favorite entry points for ants).

- Keep plants and mulch away from the foundations of buildings; they provide nesting sites for ants.

### Remove food sources for ants:

- Store food items such as sugar, syrup, honey, and pet food in closed containers that have been washed to remove spills from outer surfaces.
- Remove garbage from the kitchen at the end of each day.
- Repair leaky sinks and hoses.

### Get rid of ants that have made their way into indoor settings:

- One or two wandering ants are scouts searching for new food or nesting sites and should be killed to prevent them from establishing a trail into the house.
- Sponging ants with soapy water removes the ants' scent trail and is effective in temporarily removing foraging ants in a building, especially if thorough cleaning and sealing of entry points is done.
- Ant baits are a key tool for managing ants and are the only type of insecticide recommended in most situations.
- Baits contain a slow acting poison mixed with a substance that attracts worker ants looking for food. Workers carry the bait back to the nest and transfer it mouth-to-mouth to other ants in order to kill the entire colony. This takes time, so be patient! Continue to clean up trails while waiting for baits to work.
- Use baits outdoors or in self-contained bait stations. Place where children do not have access to them such as under a cabinet.

If you are unsuccessful in getting rid of indoor ants, work with a pest management professional who practices IPM to identify the ant species and create a management plan.

*by Vickie Leonard, RN, PhD*

## Resources

University of California Statewide IPM Program, Pest management Ants [www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7411.html](http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7411.html)

Department of Pesticide Regulation "Ant Bait and Wait" poster [www.cdpr.ca.gov/docs/pestmgmt/pubs/ant\\_color\\_eng.pdf](http://www.cdpr.ca.gov/docs/pestmgmt/pubs/ant_color_eng.pdf)

Department of Pesticide Regulation Ant Fact Sheet: [www.cdpr.ca.gov/docs/pestmgmt/pubs/ants\\_color.pdf](http://www.cdpr.ca.gov/docs/pestmgmt/pubs/ants_color.pdf)

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