

INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT: ANTS



Columns of ants marching through playrooms, eating areas and kitchens in early care and education programs are a common problem. Don't panic! There are safe and effective ways to reduce the number of invading ants. Integrated pest management (IPM) is a strategy to prevent ant invasions, minimize pesticide use and reduce harmful exposure to children, staff and the environment.

When are ants a problem?

Some ants bite or sting, but most ants in California do not threaten human health, and they help control other pests like fleas, caterpillars and termites. A few ants sting, like the native fire ants and harvester ants, which live outdoors. The most aggressive stinging ant is the red imported fire ant, which has been found in southern California. If you suspect a fire ant infestation, report it to your county agricultural commissioner.

Characteristics and habits

Ants look for food and water to take back to their nests. They may appear suddenly in buildings if other food sources become unavailable or weather conditions change. Ants live in soil next to buildings, along sidewalks, and under stones, tree stumps, plants, boards or other protected places. Depending on the ant species and the time of year, ants eat sweets—especially a sticky substance called honeydew that is made by aphids—fruits, seeds, cooking grease, dead or live insects or dead animals. Ants often enter buildings seeking food, water, warmth and shelter, or refuge from dry, hot weather or flooded conditions.

The most common ant in California is the Argentine ant. Other ant pests include the pharaoh ant, pavement ant, odorous house ant, thief ant and velvety tree ant.

A new colony is usually established by a newly mated queen. As the colony grows over the years, it produces winged male and female ants, which leave the nest to mate and form new colonies. Unlike other ant species in California, Argentine ants have colonies that blend together to make up one large super colony with many queens. This is one reason completely eliminating these ants is impossible.

IPM strategies

1 DON'T SPRAY!

Spraying pesticides may kill ants, but spraying will expose staff and children to harmful chemicals, and doesn't eliminate ants in their nests. Pesticide residues can build up indoors where children spend a lot of time. Ant management should focus on good sanitation and maintenance, not on spraying pesticides.

Ant management requires continuous effort and its goal is to reduce the number of ants in ECE programs. You don't have to completely eliminate ants from outdoor areas because ants help control other pests like fleas, caterpillars and termites.

2 KEEP ANTS OUT

- ▶ When you see ant trails in your building, follow the ants to their entry point. Caulk cracks around foundations or openings that provide entry from outside. Pay special attention to where wires and pipes enter the building, because this is a favorite entry point for ants.
- ▶ Keep plants and mulch at least 12 inches from the foundations of buildings; they provide nesting sites for ants.

3 REMOVE ANTS' FOOD, WATER AND SHELTER

- ▶ Store food items such as snacks, sugar, syrup, honey and pet food in closed containers.
- ▶ Wipe spills from outer surfaces of containers, and from counters, tables and floors.
- ▶ Remove garbage from the kitchen at the end of each day.
- ▶ Repair leaky sinks and pipes.
- ▶ Seal indoor cracks and crevices.



ACTION PLAN FOR ANTS

WHEN TO TAKE ACTION	NONPESTICIDE PRACTICES	LEAST HARMFUL PESTICIDE	LAST RESORT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ If you see a few ants inside, there are likely to be more soon. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Clean up ants using a sponge or paper towel with soapy water. ▶ Fill any ant entryways with caulk or petroleum jelly. ▶ Remove infested potted plants. ▶ Clean up food sources. ▶ Eliminate leaks or water sources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Rely on baits, a non-spray pesticide, to manage the ants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ If you hire a PMP, insist that they use baits rather than perimeter treatments or monthly sprays.

When should you hire a pest management professional (PMP)?

If ants continue to plague you indoors, work with a PMP who practices IPM to create a management plan. Pesticides should only be used as a last resort.

RESOURCES

University of California Statewide IPM—Ants
www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7411.html
 Our Water, Our World—Controlling Ants in Your House
ourwaterourworld.org.dnnmax.com/Portals/o/documents/pdf/Ants%2009.pdf
 County Agricultural Commissioner List (if you think you have red imported fire ants)
www.cdffa.ca.gov/exec/county/county_contacts.html

California Childcare Health Program, University of California, San Francisco School of Nursing • cchp.ucsf.edu