

Sci|Tech

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Thursday, April 4, 2002

Termite attack Scientists warn springtime brings out termites

By Mandi Vest
THE BATTALION

Aggies beware! There is a not-so-new predator in town, and everyone should be on the lookout. Texas A&M experts are warning the community to look for signs of termites.

Termites, though small and out of sight, can be dangerous to building structures.

Dr. Roger Gold, a professor in the Department of Entomology, said Texas weather is conducive to these insects.

The warmth and humidity, combined with wood in the ground, provide optimal conditions for termites.

Though termites can live in a building structure all year, they may not be seen until their mating season, which is in the spring.

"Swarming season is when adult termites, or kings and queens, come out of the ground to reproduce," Gold said.

In the spring, residents may start to notice black swarms, which can be thousands of termites. The termites come above ground and move up a mud tube along the side of a structure. They stay in contact with the soil by moving the soil with them.

Seeing soil along the base of a

home could be a sign that termites have invaded. The insects eat wood and take it down to the colony underneath the surface.

Dr. Bob Wharton, a professor in the Department of Entomology, said it is always termite season. If termites are noticed on the side of a home, the insects may have been living beneath the structure for some time.

There are also termites that live above the surface and eat wooden structures that are higher off of the ground. These insects, called dry wood termites, may be harder to see.

In the past, Chlordane, a common pesticide, was used to treat building structures and would last for up to 30 years. But Chlordane was banned by the Environmental Protection Agency in 1978. Since then, other chemicals, called termiticides, have been developed to prevent termite infestations.

Termiticides such as Dursban can be found at home

improvement stores or other shops, but Gold recommended that people hire professionals to spray homes and businesses for termites.

"The major problem with self-application is that the average person does not have the equipment needed for the amount of spraying needed," Gold said.

Treating buildings for termites can be quite expensive. Gold estimates that A&M spends several thousand dollars a year on termite treatments,

and he said about \$350 million is annually spent in Texas on treatments. He said the average household spends about \$1,000 a year.

For those who want a more environment-friendly approach, Gold recommended termite bait. In this method a bait, laced with poison, is planted for the termites to find. The termites consume the bait and take it back to the colony where it will be shared with the other insects.

But Gold said this method takes much longer than others to be effective.



CHAD MALLAM • THE BATTALION

Proteins cause disease

(AP) — New research suggests illnesses as diverse as Alzheimer's, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and adult-onset diabetes are caused by proteins that fold themselves into defective shapes, rather than proteins that have undergone harmful chemical changes.

As they develop, these aberrant protein forms can clump together and break molecular havoc on healthy cells, according to two studies in Thursday's issue of the journal Nature.

Previously, scientists believed that misfolding was an unusual occurrence limited

perhaps 20 or more protein types. Instead, the effect may be common to any protein in the body, the researchers reported. Why it occurs remains unclear, but the process is believed to be associated with diseases that take decades to develop.

"There is lots of evidence that any protein can form these structures in principle," said Christopher Dobson of the University of Cambridge in England, who helped lead one of the studies.

Thomas Sudhof, a Dallas-based

investigator with the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, called the paper a major advance because it demonstrates the particular stage at which the toxic effects of the misfolded proteins can be gauged.

Proteins are the agents of change and chemical messengers in cells, and they carry out the instructions encoded in genes.

The specific roles they play are dictated by both their makeup and the three-dimensional shape they take on when folded.

On occasion, that folding can go awry. Accumulations of these rogue proteins are common in what researchers categorize as protein deposition diseases.

In Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease — a degenerative brain disorder that resembles mad cow disease in its effects — a type of misfolded protein known as a prion may replicate itself and spread to other cells to cause progressive neurological damage.

In diabetes, protein misfolding may be responsible for the blood-vessel damage, blindness and other debilitating effects of the disease.

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— Christopher Dobson
University of Cambridge

NASA gears up for new missions

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — NASA is taking more heat for space station spending as it gears up for another major phase of high-flying construction work.

Space shuttle Atlantis is scheduled to lift off Thursday with the newest piece of the international space station, a 44-foot girder. The elaborate, wired-up beam will form the foundation for a framework that ultimately will stretch longer than a football field and support a dazzling collection of solar wings and radiators.

Under new anti-terrorism precautions, the 5:13 p.m. launch time was kept secret until late Wednesday afternoon, 24 hours in advance. Until then, NASA had said only that the launch would take place between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m.

There was a 40 percent chance that rain or thunderstorms could force a delay.

While technical successes continue to mount in orbit, the latest flap on Earth is over how NASA buys spare parts for the space station. A report by NASA's inspector general office says the space agency has no assurance it is paying a fair price for these parts.

NASA spent \$334 million on station spare parts through 2000. But because the space agency did not negotiate for separate prices and did not adequately keep track of what it paid in the past, it had no way of knowing whether it paid too much, according to the inspector general's report, released Tuesday.

In addition, primary contractor Boeing omitted certain associated costs and, as a result, NASA ended up understating in its annual financial statements the value of space station parts by \$39 million from 1995 through 2000, the report said.

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