



The German cockroach

German cockroaches (*Blattella germanica*) are pests to hygiene that can be introduced into heated buildings with purchased goods. Once inside, they multiply and can transmit germs to food and human beings via their faeces and vomit. They are nocturnal and favour warm, humid environments. Insect sprays will not successfully treat an infestation in the long term. Treatment must be performed by a professional pest control company, which will examine the entire building and treat the infestation accordingly. The German cockroach is often confused with the indigenous forest cockroach, which is harmless (see our leaflet The forest cockroach). Therefore, it makes sense to have any insects you find during the warm season clearly identified.

Appearance

Adults grow to a length of 9 to 15 mm. They are brown and flat with long antennae and two appendages on the abdomen. Two black horizontal stripes on the pronotum are the key feature that distinguishes them from the indigenous forest cockroach. The forest cockroach does not have these stripes. Although they have wings, German cockroaches cannot fly.



German cockroach, photo: Reiner Pospischil

Nymphs: Young insects do not have wings and therefore look somewhat darker than adults. However, they are similar in appearance and between 2 and 9 mm long, depending on their age.

Habits

In Switzerland, German cockroaches only occur in buildings with central heating. They are nocturnal. If someone turns on the kitchen or bathroom light at night or early in the morning, they usually run away quickly and hide in gaps and crevices. The insects are only seen during the day in the event of a serious infestation. They secrete aggregation pheromones (substances that prompt cockroaches to stay in the corresponding locations) in their faeces, causing many

insects to gather in the hiding places. Cockroaches are omnivorous scavengers and eat everything from rubbish in waste bins to faecal residues in toilets, breadcrumbs on the floor, or splashes of grease on the wall. Even in very clean households, they find sufficient sustenance to survive and multiply. They do not need much to eat, provided that they have sufficient moisture.



Adult German cockroach (left) with two nymphs of different ages, image: UGZ

Life cycle

During their lifetime of 100 to 200 days, fertilised females lay four to eight egg cases, which each contain an average of 36 eggs. In favourable conditions, the insects undergo five nymphal stages. The development time from the egg case to a fully grown cockroach is approximately 100 days at 24 °C.

Distribution

The German cockroach was brought to Europe some 200 years ago as a result of trade and is now distributed across the globe. Its original habitat is presumed to be in Africa or Southeast Asia. It is found in the hotel and restaurant trade, the foodstuffs industry, in shopping centres, in swimming

pools and in hospitals, as well as in homes. In the latter, it favours the kitchen and bathroom, as these rooms offer dark nooks and crannies to hide in, as well as moisture and warmth (thanks to electrical appliances such as refrigerators, dishwashers, coffee machines etc.).

How do cockroaches get into a building?

They are carried inside luggage brought back from holiday resorts where there has been an infestation. They can be introduced with old furniture, used electrical appliances, packaging materials, foodstuffs, etc. or accidentally brought back from the workplace. Once inside the building, they move from apartment to apartment along ventilation ducts or pipes, for example. Typically, several apartments or the entire building will have problems with cockroaches.

Significance and impact on health

Cockroaches never result from dirt, nor do they point to a lack of cleanliness. However, the presence of cockroaches is unhygienic. They can roam freely across dishes, worktops and foodstuffs, leaving behind faeces as they go. These faeces consist of small, dark granules that resemble coffee grounds. At the same time, they spread bacteria that is stuck to their feet. Several million germs (salmonella, hepatitis, typhoid, tuberculosis, etc.) can live on the shell and inside the body of a cockroach. They can also carry viruses, various pathogenic species of single-celled organisms, and seven species of nematodes, as well as moulds. Cockroaches, and in particular their faeces and shed skins, can trigger an allergic reaction.

Combating cockroaches

Cockroaches do not disappear on their own. Cleaning does not help. As cockroaches tend to appear in various apartments within a building, it is worth talking to your neighbours. They are experiencing the same problem. Proof of a minor infestation can be obtained by placing glue-based traps at the insects' preferred hiding places. The cockroaches must be dealt with throughout the building at the same time. Insect control sprays do not work. You should therefore contact your property manager so that they can call in a pest control company.

Who is responsible for the cost of treatment?

The person that enlists a company must also assume the costs. In accordance with landlord and tenant law and the Regulation on General and Residential Hygiene (Canton of Zurich), the owner or manager of the property is obliged to rent the apartment in good condition and free of vermin. They are responsible for ensuring good hygienic conditions within the building. The building owner is not permitted to pass the cost of treatment on to individual tenants (see our leaflet Pest infestations: your rights).

We are here to help

Call us or send or bring in insects for us to inspect. We provide free advice to residents of Zurich.

Pest control help desk

Telephone and personal appointments for residents of Zurich: Tel. 044 412 28 38; Mo–Fr: 1:30 pm–2:30 pm.

Stadt Zürich
Umwelt- und Gesundheitsschutz
Fachstelle Schädlingsprävention
Eggbühlstrasse 23
8050 Zürich
T +41 44 412 28 38
ugz-schaedlingspraevention@zuerich.ch
stadt-zuerich.ch/schaedlingspraevention