

American Cockroaches

The American cockroach, *Periplaneta americana*, is one of the largest cockroaches found in California, averaging about 1 ½ inches in length. This is the most common pest cockroach in cities and is found nearly worldwide. The species is thought to have originated in West Africa, and was introduced to the rest of the world through the slave trade. In cold parts of the world these cockroaches are only found indoors. However, in warmer climates, and the warm summer months, they also can be found outside.

Adult and juvenile American cockroaches are reddish brown and greasy-looking, with a strong oily odor. Adults are winged and will fly in warm humid climates. They are nocturnal and hide in cracks and crevices during the day. Cockroaches tend to rest in confined places where both the top and bottom of the body contact a surface. At night when it is dark they will come out to forage. These cockroaches will feed on a wide variety of materials, including anything humans or pets will eat, plus such odd substances as toothpaste, soap and starch bindings on books.

The eggs of American cockroaches are held in a hard, brown rectangular case. Females produce egg cases and carry them protruding from the tip of the abdomen for about two days, before they glue the egg cases to surfaces behind cupboards or baseboards in damp areas, such as kitchens and bathrooms. Immature cockroaches emerge from egg cases in 6-8 weeks and require 6-12 months to mature. Adult cockroaches can live up to one year. In their lifetime females produce an average of 150 offspring.

There is rarely any clear evidence of the number of cockroaches inhabiting a room. If a few individuals are observed during the day, this is a strong indication of a large infestation. Large infestations of American cockroaches often give a room a distinctive oily odor. Debris they leave behind, feces, bits of cuticle and hairs can cause allergies and in rare cases lead to asthma.

The best way to prevent cockroach infestations is to keep kitchens, storage areas and bathrooms as clean as possible, and never to leave food out overnight. Treatment for cockroach infestations includes fumigation with insecticidal compounds or treatment of hiding places with powders containing boric acid. In apartments or condominiums the entire building must be treated simultaneously or cockroaches will simply move from one unit to the next.

Cockroaches are generally clean insects spending considerable time grooming. However, they are also important to public health. Restaurants and catering trucks are inspected for cockroaches as an indication of cleanliness. Although cockroaches clean themselves, in food preparation areas they can contaminate food and cooking/handling surfaces with bacteria, such as *E. coli*, and *Salmonella* and viruses, such as hepatitis and Noro virus, because of their habit of moving from sources of water (bathrooms) to sources of food (kitchens and pantries).



American cockroach. Photo courtesy of Kathy Keatley Garvey.