

Bed Bugs

What are bed bugs?

The common bed bug (*Cimex lectularius*) is a small insect that feeds on human blood, primarily at night when people are sleeping. Adult bed bugs have flat, oval, wingless, rusty-red-colored bodies. Adult bed bugs are about the size of an apple seed, and hide easily in cracks in furniture, floors, and walls. The typical life span of a bed bug is 10 months, and they can survive weeks to months without feeding. The common bed bug is found worldwide and are common in the developing world. In North America and Western Europe, bed bug infestations became rare during the second half of the 20th century. In recent years, bed bugs have made a comeback in the U.S. and are increasingly being encountered in homes, apartments, hotels and motels.



How are bed bugs spread?

Bed bugs are usually spread from place to place as people travel. Bed bugs travel in the seams and folds of luggage, overnight bags, folded clothes, bedding, furniture, and anywhere else they can hide. Most people do not realize they can transport bed bugs as they travel, potentially infecting new areas. This is a particular problem for hotels, motels and apartments, where turnover of occupants is constant. The eggs are almost impossible to see when laid on most surfaces. Use of secondhand beds, couches, and furniture is another way that the bugs are transported into previously non-infested dwellings.

Where do bed bugs hide?

Bed bugs can live in almost any crevice or protected location. The most common place to find them is a bed. Bed bugs often hide within seams, tufts, and crevices of a bed mattress, box spring, frame and headboard. However, many areas besides beds can harbor bed bugs. Upholstered chairs and sofas (especially when used for sleeping) should be checked carefully, including seams, tufts, skirts, and crevices. Nightstands and dressers should be emptied and examined inside and out, then tipped over to inspect the woodwork underneath because bed bugs will often be hiding in cracks, corners, and recesses. Other common places to find bed bugs include: beneath and along the edge of wall-to-wall carpeting (especially behind beds and furniture); cracks in wood moulding; ceiling-wall junctures; behind wall-mounts, picture frames, switch plates and outlets; under loose wallpaper or cracks in the wall; amongst clothing in closets; amongst clutter near sleeping areas; and inside clocks, phones, televisions and smoke detectors.

How do you inspect for bed bugs?

Look for bed bugs, blood stains, droppings, eggs, and the light-brown, molted skins of the nymphs. A flashlight and magnifying glass will help in spotting signs of bed bugs. Bed bugs can be forced from cracks and crevices with a putty knife, playing card, or hot air from a blow-dryer on low setting. Start by looking in an area 10-20 feet around where you sleep or sit. That's the distance a bed bug will usually travel. Keep a written record of every room and location where you find signs of bed bugs. Share the record with a pest control professional. Check the top and bottom seams, tufts, and any rips in the covers of mattresses and box springs. Check underneath the bed and along the bed frame and headboards. Bed bugs also hide among items stored under beds. Headboards secured to walls should also be removed and inspected. Check cracks and crevices in bedroom furniture, floor boards and baseboards, windows, and door frames. Remove drawers from furniture and check the inside, top, bottom, joints, and even screw holes. Check zippers, seams, and tufts in cushions of upholstered furniture and their frames. Check wall hangings, cracks in walls, and peeling wallpaper. Check face plates of electrical outlets and light switches. Check phones, clocks, smoke detectors, and toys. If inspecting a hotel or motels, the area behind the headboard is often the first place that the bugs become established. If live bed bugs are found during the inspection, crush them with a paper towel and throw them away outside your building.

What are the symptoms of bed bug bites?

Bed bugs feed by piercing the skin to withdraw blood, yet people seldom know they are being bitten. Symptoms thereafter vary with the individual. Many people develop an itchy red welt or localized swelling, which may appear within minutes or days of the bite. Others have little or no reaction. Bites occur on bare skin exposed during sleep. It is important to recognize that not *all* bites or bite-like reactions are due to bed bugs. Confirmation requires finding and identifying the bugs themselves, which may require the help of a professional. Infestations also may cause anxiety and loss of sleep.

Do bed bugs transmit disease?

Although bed bugs and their bites are a nuisance, they are not known to spread disease. Their medical significance is mainly limited to itching and inflammation from their bites.

How do you treat bed bug bites?

Antihistamines and corticosteroids may be prescribed to reduce allergic reactions, and antiseptic or antibiotic ointments help prevent infection. If bites become infected people should seek advice from their healthcare provider.

How do you treat bed bug infestations?

Begin by reducing clutter to reduce places bed bugs can hide. Wipe off dead bugs, blood stains, eggs, and droppings from hard surfaces with hot soapy water. Wash all items showing bed bug stains in hot water (140°F) and dry on the highest setting for at least 20 minutes. Other items suspected of having bed bugs should be placed in a hot dryer for at least 20 minutes to kill bed bugs. After drying, store items in sealed plastic bags until you are sure the bed bugs are gone. Vacuum carpets, floors, bed frames, furniture, cracks and crevices daily using the brush and crevice tools. Empty the vacuum, or seal and dispose of its bag outside of your building after each use. Repair cracks in plaster, repair or remove any loose wallpaper, and tighten light switch and electrical outlet covers. Apply caulk to seal crevices and joints in baseboards and gaps on shelving or cabinets. Usually, it is not necessary to get rid of furniture or bedding at the first signs of bed bugs. Cleaning and enclosing is often adequate. Place items to be thrown away securely in plastic bags. Label with a sign that says “infested with bed bugs”.

While the former measures are helpful, bed bug infestations usually require the use of pesticides. Only professionals should apply pesticides for bed bugs. Foggers and bug bombs are not effective against them. Not all pest control companies are well trained in managing bed bugs. Find a company through dependable referrals, directories, professional associations and check to make sure they are licensed. Once you hire a company, be clear about what you want done and monitor performance.

What do I do with the bed?

Begin by thoroughly vacuuming the living space, especially in the sleeping areas and around and under the bed. Next inspect and clean the headboard and bed frame. They are easily cleaned with standard household cleaning agents. Then enclose the infested mattress and box spring in a cover that is labeled “allergen rated”, “for dust mites”, or “for bed bugs” for at least a full year. Periodically check the cover for rips or openings and tape these up as they become evident. This cover will deny bed bugs access to the mattress and entrap any bugs already inside. Box springs should only be discarded if they cannot be covered and are heavily infested.

How do you prevent bed bug infestations?

Households should be wary of acquiring used furnishings, especially beds and couches. Curbside items should be avoided, and secondhand items should be examined closely before being brought into the home. When traveling, inspect the bed and furniture. Inspection of the bed should include the bed sheets and the upper and lower seams of the mattress. The headboard and area behind it is also a frequent hiding place for bed bugs in hotel rooms. If bed bugs are detected, travelers can request another room. Travelers may also want to elevate suitcases off the floor (e.g. on a luggage stand) and inspect them before returning home. If you suspect you have been around bed bugs, immediately wash and dry your clothing on hot settings or store them in a sealed plastic bag until you can attend to them.

References:

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