

Bed Bugs – What You Need to Know

Bed bug infestations are rapidly increasing worldwide and have made a comeback in the United States. Bed bugs are increasingly being seen in homes, apartments, health care facilities, schools, dormitories, shelters, motels, and even upscale hotels. Sometimes they also appear in movie theaters, laundries/dry cleaners, office buildings, and furniture rental outlets.

Increased international travel, the end of the use of the pesticide DDT and other changes in pest control practice are some of the factors contributing to this resurgence.

What are bed bugs?

Bed bugs are small but visible to the naked eye, oval shaped, wingless, brownish, flattened insects with prominent eyes. They get their name because they like to live and feed in beds. Adult bed bugs are about ¼ inch long, do not fly, and are sometimes mistaken for ticks or cockroaches. They are mainly night feeders and feed only on blood of warm-blooded animals. Depending on the temperature, bed bugs may live for several weeks or months without feeding.

Under good conditions (temperature above 70° F and regular feeding), a female bed bug, during her lifetime, will lay about 200 to 500 tiny, white eggs in batches of 10 to 50. The eggs hatch in 6 to 17 days and the nymphs (larvae that resemble the adult) begin to feed on blood immediately.

How can you tell if your house is infested

Bed bugs can hide in mattresses, furniture, behind loose wallpaper, baseboards, even inside electrical equipment. They emerge to feed in the dark. Carefully inspect the bed frame, mattress and other furniture for signs of bed bugs, their eggs and dark spotting—feces or blood stains from a bug that had a full meal.

Since bed bugs are hard to spot and difficult to eliminate, you may need an inspection from a professional

pest management agency. Some companies do this for free, hoping to be hired to remove the bed bugs. Recent research has shown searching with trained dogs can be an effective method for finding bed bug infestations.

What are the signs and symptoms?

A bed bug infestation is more a skin-crawling nuisance than a health problem. The most common sign of bed bug bites is development of small red-looking, itchy bumps on the surface of skin. The linear or clustered lesions indicate repeated feedings by a single bed bug. Some people may develop severe skin reactions that results in inflammation and swelling of the skin at the site of the bite.

In rare cases reactions to bed bug bites can include asthma, generalized hives and even a life-threatening allergy called anaphylaxis that requires emergency treatment. Currently there is no scientific evidence that bed bugs spread diseases such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Tips for Prevention

- **Avoid bringing bed bugs home when you travel.** If you visit infested areas, bed bugs may travel by hiding in your suitcases and clothes. Inspect your luggage and clothes.
- **Inspect your house carefully.** You can detect a bed bug infestation by searching for the insects or their fecal spots, egg cases, and shed skins. This includes mattresses, carpeting, pillows and sofa beds, as well as behind chairs and dressers.
- **Cover your mattress in plastic.** Experts agree that covering mattresses and box springs with durable, leak-proof encasements that prevent any bugs from getting in or out may help.
- **Check any secondhand furniture you buy.** If you purchase second-hand furniture, especially beds or mattresses, carefully inspect it.

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References and Resources

Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, Emerging Infectious Disease at www.cdc.gov/ncidod/EID/

Harvard School of Public Health, Bed Bugs Biology and Management online at www.hsph.harvard.edu/bedbugs/



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