

## Beating Bed Bugs

*Keep bed bugs from bothering you*



Courtesy of Piotr Naskrecki/CDC/Harvard University

You would be hard-pressed to turn on the television or open a newspaper these days without hearing or reading a story about the resurgence of bed bugs in America.

Scientifically known as *Cimex lectularius*, bed bugs were all but eliminated from the United States with the use of DDT as a pesticide in the 1950s. However, DDT use was banned in the 1970s, and with increased immigration and international travel today, bed bug infestations are making a come-back.

Bed bugs are oval, wingless, reddish-brown insects that feed on human or animal blood at night. Nearly the size of an apple seed, they measure approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch. Their bodies are flat until they feed, at which time they can grow to three times their normal size. Amazingly enough, these insects can survive for approximately one year without feeding. Bed bugs prefer to live as close to their meals as possible. You will most often find them hiding under mattresses, headboards, box springs and bed frames. It is important to keep in mind, however, that these pervasive blood suckers will also take up residence in furniture, underneath baseboards or even on stuffed animals. Hidden away from view, any crevice, nook or cranny in the home could become an ideal bed bug habitat.

Bites from these menaces resemble flea and mosquito bites except that they occur in a series of three or four and are often accompanied by a rash. Bed bugs do not transmit diseases, although their bites may be painful. Some people will show little to no signs of being bit while others may have their bites develop into painful, itchy welts. People are typically bit on the legs, back and arms. It is hard to catch bed bugs in the act because they are nocturnal feeders. Once there is an infestation in the home, bites occur almost every night.

Infestation prevention is much easier than infestation elimination because of the bed bug's prolific and resilient nature. Home infestations begin with bed bugs or bed bug larvae being introduced into the home through a contaminated source. Bed bugs are expert stowaways, and can crawl into luggage, furniture, clothing, and many other products offering sufficient hiding space. The best way to prevent an infestation is to carefully inspect items coming into your home. Bed bugs are visible to the human eye, and can also be identified by blood stains, exoskeletons and fecal matter left behind.

Exoskeletons are the bugs' hard outer shells that are discarded as they grow. Their fecal matter is essentially dried blood and will appear dark red to almost black in color and resemble the blood stains.

Be cautious when picking up secondhand goods. Secondhand goods should be carefully inspected and cleaned before making their way into your home. Bed bugs are killed in high temperatures, and therefore it is recommended to wash and dry all new clothing and linens before placing them in your closet. Simply running clothing in the dryer for 30 minutes will kill any bugs that may be lurking in your new outfit. Another way to prevent bed bugs is to take advantage of special mattress covers called encasements. These covers will enclose your mattress and should suffocate any bugs that are living there and prevent new ones from moving in. Occasional mattress, carpet and drape steaming will also help to prevent an infestation. Habitual scans underneath your mattress and headboard will help to identify if you have the beginnings of an infestation.

Traveling can also present an opportunity for bed bugs to hitch a free ride home with you. Avoid placing your luggage on a hotel bed. You may also want to keep your suitcase off the floor to prevent bed bugs from climbing aboard. Check underneath the headboard and mattress at hotels for tell-tale bed bug signs to ensure that your room is free of an infestation. Once you arrive home, launder all of your clothing and carefully inspect your suitcase and belongings before bringing them inside.

While the Greater Los Angeles County Vector Control District does not control for bed bugs, there are many resources and services available to assist with you with a possible infestation. If you believe that bed bugs are in your home, it is recommended that you contact a licensed pest management professional as soon as possible. These experts will be able to confirm that bed bugs are your problem and instruct you further on how to disinfect your home. Fumigation may be necessary if a severe infestation has occurred, and they will discuss this process with you. For more information on bed bugs, you can visit the California Department of Public Health website at [www.cdph.ca.gov](http://www.cdph.ca.gov).