

# Bedbugs

Bedbugs have been feasting on sleeping humans for thousands of years. After World War II, they were eradicated from most developed nations with the use of DDT. This pesticide has since been banned because it's so toxic to the environment.

Spurred perhaps by increases in international travel, bedbugs are becoming a problem once again. The risk of encountering bedbugs increases if you spend time in places with high turnovers of night-time guests — such as hotels, hospitals or homeless shelters.

Bedbugs are reddish brown, oval and flat, about the size of an apple seed. During the day, they hide in the cracks and crevices of beds, box springs, headboards and bed frames. It's a daunting task to eliminate bedbugs from your home. Professional help is recommended.

It can be difficult to distinguish bedbug bites from other insect bites. In general, the sites of bedbug bites usually are:

- Red, often with a darker red spot in the middle
- Itchy
- Arranged in a rough line or in a cluster
- Located on the face, neck, arms and hands

Some people have no reaction at all to bedbug bites, while others experience an allergic reaction that can include severe itching, blisters or hives.

The resurgence of bedbugs in developed countries may be linked to:

- Increased international travel
- Changes in pest control practices
- Insecticide resistance

A female bedbug can lay more than 200 eggs in her lifetime, which typically lasts for about 10 months. Newly hatched bedbugs are nearly colorless, so they are hard to spot. They shed their skin five times as they grow, and need a blood meal for each molt.

### Where do they hide?

During the day, bedbugs hide in the cracks and crevices of:

- Mattresses
- Box springs
- Bed frames
- Headboards

They also can be found:

- Under peeling paint and loose wallpaper
- Under carpeting near baseboards
- In upholstered furniture seams
- Under light switch plates or electrical outlets

### How do they spread?

Bedbugs don't usually stay on their human hosts after their meal, but they might take refuge in clothes or luggage left nearby on the floor.

If you're traveling and bedbugs get into your luggage, you might bring them home with you.

While bedbugs may hitchhike on your belongings, they also can crawl about as fast as a ladybug. So they can easily travel between floors and rooms in hotels or apartment complexes.

Some varieties of bedbugs prefer to feed on birds or bats, so they may take up residence in your attics or eaves. If their preferred prey migrates south, these bedbugs will settle for feeding on the humans in the house.

### Sign of uncleanliness?

Bedbugs don't care if their environment is clean or dirty. All they need is a warm host and plenty of hiding places. Even pristine homes and hotels can harbor bedbugs.

Most bedbug bites require no medical treatment. You may want to consult your family doctor if you experience an allergic reaction to the bites or if you develop a skin infection after scratching the bites.

If you suspect that you're being bitten by bedbugs, immediately inspect your home for the insects. Thoroughly examine crevices in walls, mattresses and furniture. You may need to perform your inspection at night when bedbugs are active.

### Look for these signs:

- Dark specks. Typically found along mattress seams, these specks are bedbug excrement.
- Empty exoskeletons. Bedbugs molt five times before becoming adults. These empty skins are light brown.

- Bloody smears. You may find small smears of blood on the sheets where you accidentally crushed an engorged bedbug

The redness and itch associated with bedbug bites usually goes away on their own within a week or two. You might speed your recovery by using:

- A skin cream containing hydrocortisone
- An oral antihistamine, such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl)

If you develop a skin infection from scratching bedbug bites, your doctor may prescribe an antibiotic.

### Treating your home

Once your symptoms are treated, you must tackle the underlying infestation. This can be difficult because bedbugs hide so well and can live for months without eating. Your best bet may be to hire a professional exterminator, who may use a combination of pesticides and nonchemical treatments.

### Nonchemical treatments may include:

- Vacuuming. A thorough vacuuming of cracks and crevices can physically remove bedbugs from an area. But vacuum cleaners can't reach all hiding places.
- Hot water. Washing clothes and other items in water at least 120 F (49 C) can kill bedbugs.

- Clothes dryer. Placing wet or dry items in a clothes dryer set at medium to high heat for 20 minutes will kill bedbugs and their eggs.
- Enclosed vehicle. If it's summer, you can bag up infested items and leave them in a car parked in the sun with the windows rolled up for a day. The target temperature is at least 120 F (49 C).
- Freezing. Bedbugs are also vulnerable to temperatures below 32 F (0 C) but you'd need to leave the items outdoors or in the freezer for several days.
- Some professional exterminators use portable devices to produce steam, heat or freezing temperatures to kill bedbugs. In some cases, you may have to throw out heavily infested items such as mattresses or couches.

### Preventing bites

- Cover up. Because bedbugs don't tend to burrow under clothing, you may be able to avoid bites by wearing pajamas that cover as much skin as possible. You can also find sleep sacks at travel and outdoor stores to use when away at hotels.
- Bug spray. Insect repellents designed to protect against mosquitos or ticks aren't very effective against bedbugs.

### Preventing infestations

- Secondhand items. Inspect used mattresses or upholstered furniture carefully before bringing them into your home.

- Hotel precautions. Check mattress seams for bedbug excrement and place your luggage on tables or dressers instead of on the floor. Wash all clothing in hot water on returning home from a trip.
- Birds and bats. Eliminate any neighboring bird and bat habitats that may serve as a refuge for bedbugs, especially following an extermination attempt