Bed Bug Prevention for Travelers

There is nothing "magic" about the way these pests begin an infestation. They are parasites that look to resting people or animals for a meal. Afterward, they travel back to a place of hiding. Bed bugs are hard to detect and control because they have excellent abilities to squeeze into cracks and crevices and will go unnoticed by the "casual observer."

The majority of bugs will cluster around areas where people rest, but a few of them will move off to hide in more remote areas. They avoid light and if they are disturbed or if they suddenly "feel" exposed, they will attempt to move to quieter (and more remote) areas. It is this secretive behavior that creates the challenge to dis-infesting articles that have been in areas of bed bug activity and causes the impression that they have "special abilities" that we cannot contend with.

What do bed bugs look like?

Bed bugs are oval, flattened, brown and wingless insects approximately ¼ to ⅜ inch long. They are similar in shape and size to an apple seed. After the bug has taken a blood meal, its color will become reddish-brown. Also after feeding, it is larger and more cigar-shaped making it appear like a different insect. Young bed bugs are much smaller (1/16 inch when they hatch) and nearly colorless except after feeding, but resemble the adult in general shape. You may also find cast skins, which are empty shells of bugs as they grow from one stage to the next. After a blood meal, bed bugs leave fecal spots (composed of digested blood) that look brown or reddish-brown in areas next to the feeding site or back at their hiding places.

How do I check for bed bugs in hotel/motel rooms?

- Pull back the bedding and look for black fecal spots on the mattress and box springs, especially around the seams.
- Carefully examine the underside of the bed skirt.
- Look for signs of bed bugs along the bed frame, especially around the headboard.
- Open nightstand drawers and look for signs of bed bugs along inner and outer edges.
- Look for signs of bed bugs along baseboards.
- DO NOT STAY IN A ROOM WITH SIGNS OF BED BUGS!

How can I reduce the chances of bringing bed bugs home?

Before you leave home, pack only what you will need, and pack clothing, shoes and toiletries in sealable plastic bags. Take a few extra sealable plastic bags for storing worn items. While away, keep clothing in a zippered suitcase rather than unpacking into the dresser drawers. Hanging clothing in the closet is fine. Keep your suitcase on the luggage rack (after first checking for signs of bed bugs); do not store your belongings on the bed, floor or upholstered furniture. The bathtub is the best place to store your items! Place purchased items, especially clothes and shoes, in sealable plastic bags before putting in your suitcase.

Are there bed bugs on any personal items that traveled with me?

You can only confirm that bed bugs are present by carefully inspecting each item. Pay attention to cracks, crevices, seams and folds of material. Remember that bed bugs can be as small as 1/16 inch to ¼ inch and young, unfed bugs may be mostly colorless. If you find bugs, then you have to be careful in containing the infestation. If you do not find bugs, but still suspect there may be an infestation, the steps mentioned below will provide peace-of-mind and ensure that you do not bring an infestation home.

Bed Bug Prevention For Travelers continued

Will bed bugs travel on people?

Bed bugs may hitch a ride on clothing that people wear, but they are not like lice and will not travel directly on a person. If you are concerned about bed bugs on clothing, remove suspect articles and place these items into a plastic bag. It would be preferable to remove clothing in a place with a non-carpeted floor. Bed bugs will have to travel some distance before finding a hiding spot. A wet cloth wiped over the floor area will help contain any bed bugs that may have attempted to escape.

I have clothes and personal items that I want to keep. How can I assure myself these are not carrying bed bugs?

People just want to discard all luggage and clothing after discovering an infestation, but this is unnecessary. The key is to contain all items suspected of carrying bed bugs in plastic bags until the items can be laundered, washed by hand, heated or frozen.

Before leaving the infested site, anything that can be laundered should be sorted and placed in plastic bags. Separate the laundry as you would if you were normally laundering items, specifically: light colored clothes from dark items; delicate items from items that can be laundered on wash / dry regular cycles; and finally, dry cleanable items. Separating the clothing permits easy loading of the washing machine and you can avoid escaping bed bugs as you try to sort the laundry at home. Plastic bags that contained the suspect laundry can be frozen or collected into a clean garbage bag.

When washing, set the washer and dryer for the hottest setting that the fabric can withstand. If you need to use a dry cleaning service, tell them that the items may have bed bugs. They will know to keep the articles in the plastic bags until just before loading into the machines.

The suitcases and items that cannot be placed into a washing machine should be carefully inspected, and if bed bugs are found (or you are not sure), place them into plastic bags, as well. Suitcases (and non-laundered items) can be hand-washed. If hand-washing any items, use soapy water and make sure that the hottest water possible is used. Be careful with hot water, because, even from a tap, hot water may burn. Test the item to make sure it will not be affected by the hot water. A target temperature of 100oF to 120oF should be sufficient. Use a scrub brush along the seams and folds.

Items that cannot be washed may be heated or frozen. Two hours at 120oF (45oC) is considered a minimum temperature for heat treatments. For freezing, a minimum of 23oF (- 5oC) must be maintained for at least five days. Keep in mind that most non-commercial freezers will have varying temperatures between 30oF and 20oF, and a two-week freeze time is recommended if you are uncertain of the freezer temperatures.

Still have some doubts?

If you are still concerned about bed bugs becoming a problem in your home, contact a professional pest control company for inspection and control measures.

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