

“HELP! I STAYED AT A PLACE THAT HAD BED BUGS!”

WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT BRINGING THEM HOME?”

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This title of this factsheet is a topic of phone calls and emails that I commonly encounter when people have found bed bugs in the place where they are staying. I would like to provide some specific steps that you can use to prevent hitchhiking bed bugs from infesting your home.

Before I provide these preventative steps for ensuring that items that have traveled with you are not infested (or to dis-infest articles with bed bugs), let me mention that there is nothing “magic” about the way these pests initiate an infestation. They are simply parasites that look to resting persons or animals for a meal and once obtaining this meal, they travel back to a place of hiding.

The thing that makes bed bugs so challenging for detection and control is they have excellent abilities to squeeze into cracks and crevices and will often go unnoticed by the “casual observer.” As mentioned in other factsheets the majority of bugs will cluster around areas where people will rest, but a few of them will move off to hide in more remote areas. Finally, they shun 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 cryptic behavior that creates the challenge to dis-infesting articles that have been in areas of bed bug activity and cause the impression that they have “special abilities” that we cannot contend with.

The following are questions that I commonly encounter and the recommendations you can use to prevent transport of bed bugs from an infested site.



2nd instar bed bug (Scale in 32nds of an inch)

What do bed bugs look like?

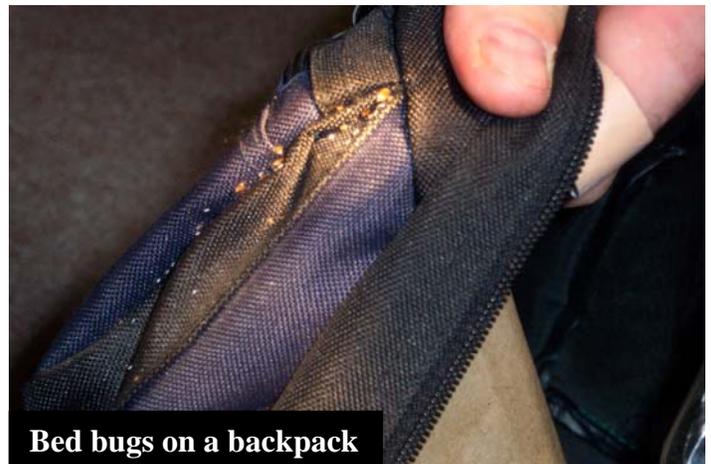
Bed bugs are oval, flattened, brown, and wingless insects approximately 1/4 to 3/8 inch long (5 – 9 mm). They are similar in appearance to a 'wood' tick. After the bug has taken a blood meal, its color will change from brown to purplish-red. Also after feeding, it is larger and more cigar-shaped making it appear like a different insect. Young bed bugs are much smaller (1/16" or 1.6 mm when they first 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 deposit fecal spots (composed of digested blood) in areas adjacent to the feeding site or back at their hiding places.



Different stages of bed bugs (1/16" to 1/4" in size) and fecal spots

Are there bed bugs on the personal effects 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 1/16 inch to 1/4 inch and young, unfed bugs may be mostly translucent (see pictures). 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 bugs on a backpack

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, so 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?

I have many comments that people just want to discard all luggage and clothing after discovering an infestation, but I feel 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, I recommend you mention to them that the items may have bed bugs and they can 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 100°F to 120°F should be sufficient. Use a scrub brush along the seams and folds.

Items that cannot be washed may be heated or frozen. Currently, research is being conducted to determine the most effective thermal conditions for killing bed bugs, while not damaging materials. However, based on related research, a two hour core exposure at 120°F (45°C) should be considered a minimum target temperature for heat treatments. For freezing, a minimum of 23°F (-5°C) must be maintained for at least 5 days. As the temperature is decreased, the time of exposure is shortened. For instance, the articles could be “flash frozen” resulting in a very short time of exposure, but the target temperature should be -15°F (-26°C) - the conditions required to instantly freeze the eggs. Keep in mind that most non-commercial freezers will have varying temperatures between 30°F and 20°F, and a 2 week freeze time is recommended if you are uncertain of the freezer temperatures.

Just to re-iterate, if heating or freezing conditions are used, remember that these adverse conditions must reach the core of the articles being treated.

Still have some doubts?

If you are still concerned about bed bugs becoming a problem in your home, it is recommended that you contact a Professional Pest Control Company for inspection and control measures.

For more information regarding bed bug identification, behavior and control, please see the website: www.ipmctoc.umn.edu .

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