

WHATCOM COUNTY Health Department

*Leading the community in promoting
health and preventing disease.*



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What You Should Know About Bed Bugs

Summer is prime travel season, and in addition to souvenirs, you may unwittingly bring home an unwelcome vacation memento—bed bugs.

Bed bugs are usually transported from place to place as people travel. They commonly travel in seams and folds of luggage, overnight bags, folded clothes, bedding, and furniture. They will travel anywhere they can find a hiding place. Since travel and moving peak during the summer season, bed bugs may have more opportunities to spread during this time of year.

The experts at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) say that bed bugs are found worldwide. They do not, however, spread disease. And they can be found in the finest hotels because “their presence is not determined by the cleanliness of the living conditions where they are found.”

What is a bed bug? Bed bugs, or *Cimex lectularius*, are small, flat, parasitic insects that feed on the blood of people and animals while they sleep. They are reddish-brown, wingless, and range from very small (1mm) to 7mm (about the size of Lincoln’s head on a penny).

What do bed bug bites look like? Bed bugs are most active at night, and typically bite the face, neck, hands, and arms. A bedbug bite can be painless and most often looks like small, flat, or raised [bumps](#) on the skin. Symptoms include redness, swelling, and [itching](#). Though bed bug bites do not spread disease, each person reacts differently to them and some people can have allergic reactions. Also, to avoid secondary infections that can result from bites, avoid scratching and apply antiseptic creams or lotions and take an antihistamine. Your local pharmacist can give you guidance in that regards. But if an infection worsens, then it’s time to seek medical help.

How will you know if you have bed bugs? Bed bugs are on the rise in North America so understanding how to prevent their spread is becoming more important. Because bite marks may take as long as 14 days to develop in some people, it is important to first look for the following signs to see if you have bed bugs:

- Do you see discarded “skins” (the exoskeleton) of the bugs? They leave these behind after molting.
- Can you find bed bugs hiding in the folds of your mattress or sheets?
- Do you see rust-colored blood spots on your mattress or nearby furniture?

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- Do you smell a sweet, musty odor?

If you can say “yes” to two or more of these questions, it’s likely you have a bed bug problem.

How can you rid your home of bed bugs? While bed bugs are best treated by professional insecticide spraying, there are some things you can do that may help the problem. Bed bugs generally do not like heat and temperatures over 113 degrees will kill most of them. Steam treatment of mattresses and upholstered furniture can decrease their numbers as well as washing linens and pajamas at high temperatures. Dry heat is also effective. Running bedding, clothing, and other items (such as stuffed animals) through an average clothes dryer cycle may also work to help eliminate the bugs. It is suggested that you run these items through a dryer cycle at the highest temperature (about 180 degrees) for more than 20 minutes.

Despite your best efforts, you might need to seek professional help. If you suspect that you have an infestation, contact your landlord or professional pest control company that is experienced with treating bed bugs.

How can you prevent bed bugs infestations? The best way to prevent bed bugs is regular inspection for skins, spots, and odors. Because bed bugs can survive for several months without a meal, the presence of bites on the body is not the only way to determine if you have bed bugs in your home. In addition to regular inspections, you can prevent the spread of bed bugs by not bringing in used furniture without careful examination. Lastly, when traveling, keep your suitcases off the floor and off beds. Instead, place them on valet stands or tables.

While bed bugs are a nuisance, bites are uncomfortable, and removal is a lot of work, it is important to remember that bed bugs do not spread disease. Please take extra caution to avoid bed bug infestations, and enjoy all the good things that summer brings.

This information is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. If you have any questions about bed bugs or think that you may have a bed bug infection, consult a health care provider.

For more information on bed bugs and to see pictures of what they look like, visit this CDC website link: <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/bedbugs/>.

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