

Bedbugs Are Back, And They're Biting

Dr. Todd Huffman, for the Eugene *Register-Guard*, August 2009

“Don't let the bedbugs bite”. While for generations parents have ended their goodnights to their children with this cheery caution, most parents have never seen nor dreamed of seeing one of these nasty critters.

That's because bedbugs were thought to have been eradicated in North America fifty years ago, the result of widespread use of DDT. But they're ba-a-a-ack, and they're invading college dormitories, hotel rooms, shelters, cruise ships, and more often ordinary homes. Not since World War II has the United States seen such a bedbug outbreak.

Bedbugs are small wingless insects that live in the dark crevices of mattresses, sofas, and sheets. Seldom seen during the day, most often about an hour before dawn they emerge to painlessly sip a few drops of blood from sleeping humans and their house pets. Bedbugs are not known to transmit any infectious agents.

Adult bedbugs are reddish-brown, oval-shaped from above, but flattened from top to bottom. If having recently fed, the host's blood may appear as a dark red or black mass within the bug's body.

Large enough to be visible to the naked eye, bedbugs grow to 4-5 mm in size, comparable to apple seeds. Unable to fly, they do not move quickly enough to escape the notice of an attentive observer.

The faint-hearted and insect-phobic might now wish to jump ahead.

Though bedbugs can live for a year or more without feeding, they typically seek blood every five to ten days. They reach their host by crawling, or sometimes climb the walls to the ceiling and jump down on feeling a heat wave. Attracted by warmth and the presence of carbon dioxide, the bedbug finds its host and pierces its skin with two hollow tubes.

With one tube it injects its saliva – which contains an anesthetic so as not to waken the victim – while with the other it withdraws blood. After feeding for a few minutes, the bedbug returns to its hiding place. The bite is not usually felt by the host until an hour or more afterwards, when a desire is felt to scratch the bite site. Bedbug bites are often aligned three in a row, giving rise to the colloquialism “breakfast, lunch, and dinner”.

Visible swelling may take up to a week to appear, as a small red bump or flat welt, and may be mistaken for flea bites, mosquito bites, scabies, or an allergic reaction to a food or medication. Repeat bites during a period of several weeks or more causes people to become sensitized to the bedbug saliva; additional bites may then result in mild to intense widespread allergic reactions.

As with all these conditions, continued scratching often intensifies the irritation and itching, and may lead to secondary infection.

The faint-hearted and insect-phobic may here return.

Bedbug populations have resurged over the past decade throughout North America, Europe, and Australia. They are most abundant in rooms where people sleep, and generally hide nearest the

bed or other furniture used for sleeping. Favored hiding sites include the bed frame, mattress, and box spring. Clutter around the bedroom offers additional sites for bedbugs to hide.

Because bedbugs are flattened, they easily hide in small crevices, and may enter a home as stowaways in luggage, used furniture, used bed clothing, and boxes used to move belongings between apartments, homes, and hotels. Because they survive for many months without feeding, bed bugs may already be present in apparently 'vacant' or 'clean' apartments.

Bedbugs infest only a small number of homes, but should be suspected if residents complain of bites that occurred while sleeping, or of a worsening itchy and unexplained rash. If bedbugs are suspected, all sleeping areas should be carefully inspected.

Folds and creases in the bed linens, and seams and tufts of mattresses and box springs warrant closest inspection. Bedbugs may also be found within pleats of curtains, beneath loose areas of wallpaper, in corners of desks and drawers, within cracks along molding, and within any loose clutter that has long inhabited a single spot on the floor.

Sometimes, characteristic dark brown or reddish fecal spots of bedbugs are apparent on the light-colored bed linens, mattress, or walls near the bed. A peculiar coriander-like odor may be detected in heavily infested residences. Perhaps the easiest detection and trapping method is to place double-sided carpet tape in long strips around the bed and check the strips after a day or more.

If live bedbugs are discovered, don't panic. Although bedbugs can be annoying, and stubborn to be rid of, they can be eradicated if you adopt a well-considered strategy.

Above all else, do not apply pesticides in haste and by yourself. Pesticides can be toxic to humans. Moreover, bedbugs are resistant to many pesticides, and it's difficult for pesticides to reach them in every crack and crevice in which they hide.

Because bedbugs are blood feeders, they cannot be lured by bait. Scrub potentially infested surfaces with a stiff brush to dislodge any eggs, and use a powerful vacuum to remove bedbugs from cracks and crevices. Dismantling bed frames with expose additional hiding sites. Remove drawers from desks and dressers to clean, and turn furniture over to inspect.

Launder all bed clothes in hot water. Permanently encase mattresses and box springs within special mattress bags. Tuck in sheets and blankets so that any missed bedbugs can't climb them into bed. Place the frame legs into dishes or cups of mineral oil.

Caulk and seal all holes where pipes and wires penetrate walls and floor, and fill cracks around baseboards and moldings to further reduce places that might harbor bedbugs.

If you own your own residence, and you have found live bedbugs, consider contacting a licensed pest control operator who is knowledgeable and experienced in managing bedbug infestations. Ask the pest control company for references before signing any contract.

If you are a tenant, contact your property manager, who is legally obligated to contract with a licensed pest control operator.

Sleep tight!