Preventing the Spread of Bed Bugs

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In many cases, bed bug problems start when they “hitch-hike” in our luggage during trips and stays at hotels and rental properties. Here are some tips on what you should do if you know or suspect that you picked up some bed bugs during a trip.

Know the signs of bed bugs
Bites or rashes can be caused by a number of things and are not reliable indicators of a bed bug problem. Look for actual bed bugs and their fecal smears. Bed bugs are reddish-brown, oval, flattened insects from 1/4” - 1/3” long and 1/16” - 1/8” wide before feeding (picture above). After a blood-meal, they are swollen and dull red.

Bed bugs can be difficult to spot on furniture, luggage, backpacks, etc. particularly if the items are dark in color. They like to hide in crevices no thicker than a credit card. Their oval white eggs are only 1/25” and even more difficult to spot. The picture on the right shows a bed bug and dark-colored fecal smears on the seams of a mattress.

What should you do if you find bed bugs where you’re staying?

- Notify the owner/manager so they can address the problem as quickly as possible. However, we strongly discourage spraying occupied rooms with pesticides.

- Place your clothing and other items (such as towels, bed linen, etc/) back into your luggage or into trash bags. Place luggage into trash bags (preferably double-bagged) and seal the bags with tape or tie them in knots. This will allow you to transport the luggage back home in your car. It is not necessary to spray your clothing or luggage with a pesticide.

- Carefully inspect the clothing you are wearing to make sure that bed bugs did not crawl onto you while you were handling items that you suspect may be infested. You should not apply insecticides to the clothing you are wearing or to your skin or hair. Unlike head lice, bed bugs do not remain on their hosts and so it is unlikely that they are infesting your hair. If you are concerned about it, simply comb/brush your hair thoroughly.

- Once you reach home, avoid opening and unpacking the bags and luggage except where you can contain the contents. For example, open them outdoors, or in a garage or in a bathtub where you can more easily spot any bed bugs.
  - Place washable clothing into trash bags and then empty the bag into a washing machine. If you have to take your laundry to a laundromat, reseal the bags before carrying them or placing them back into a vehicle.
  - Wash clothing and other items in warm-hot soapy water as appropriate for the particular item. Then, place items into the dryer for at least 30 minutes (or longer if needed to dry the clothing). Garments that cannot be washed/dried may need to be dry cleaned. Steaming is an option, but this requires the use of a commercial-type (or hand-held) steamer unit.
  - NOTE: Keep unwashed clothing in sealed trash bags until you’re ready to launder them. Do not leave piles of unwashed clothing on the floor or on a nearby countertop near clean laundry. It is possible for bed bugs to crawl out away and infest your clean items.
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- If you prefer to discard clothing or other items, make sure they are placed into trash bags before you carry them out of your home or else you may spread them indoors. Also, discard them in a closed trash can, dumpster, or at the landfill. Never leave items next to a trash can or dumpster where someone else might pick them up.

- Backpacks, duffel bags, and similar items can often be placed into a clothes dryer for 30 minutes without damaging them. In the case of larger luggage or items that can’t be dried in a clothes dryer, you can use a portable steamer unit or you can treat them lightly with an insecticide. Use a spray contained “pyrethrins” or another product that is labeled for treating fabric. Seal the luggage in trash bags and leave them in there for several weeks. Clean all treated surfaces of luggage with soapy water before you re-use it.

- Placing items in sealed bags in your car (or on your driveway) on a hot day may kill bed bugs IF the interior temperature exceeds 130°F. However, keep in mind that clothing and other items may actually insulate bed bugs and their eggs. So, just because you the thermometer may show the temperature as close to 130°F does not necessarily mean that all of the items were heated thoroughly. If you try this method, you may want to keep these items separated from uninfested goods until you are certain no bed bug eggs hatched (usually within two weeks).

- It is not necessary to treat your house for bed bugs if you follow these procedures. Bed bug treatments are time-consuming and expensive because they are done in a manner to target suspect areas and to minimize your exposure to chemicals. Treating for bed bugs is not a “do-it-yourself” job and setting off foggers (“bug bombs”) in your house will not help and can be potentially hazardous. Leave bed bug treatments to trained professionals.

For more information about bed bugs, read:  http://insects.ncsu.edu/Urban/bedbugs.htm or contact your County Cooperative Extension office.

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