

Bed Bugs and Your Family: How to prevent infestation in your home

A resurgence of *Cimex lectularius*, better known as the common bed bug, has turned playful bedtime sendoffs into truly fearful warnings. This resurrection can largely be attributed to the halt in using the pesticide DDT that nearly eradicated bed bugs in the United States in the 1950s, leaving little to no defense against the uprising miniscule offenders today. Adding to this effect is the fact that bed bugs are nocturnal in nature, preying on sleeping people across the world. They feed on human blood, leaving only a trail of red itchy welts or localized swellings on the skin as calling cards of their appearances.

While red marks may be an indication of an infestation, they are definitely not a confirmation. Finding these critters is no easy task, as they are approximately 4-5 mm in length with a flattened form, allowing them to hide in crevices and creases with ease. While often found hiding all over the house, their favorite spot to conceal themselves—in the event that a mattress cover or pillow cover are not being used—is in or around the bed, hence their name. Being so close to their primary food source gives them the opportunity to feed every 5-10 days, though they are able to live up to 18 months without eating. .

A bed bug will dine on human blood for approximately 5-15 minutes before it will be fully engorged, more than tripling its size. This change has been known to cause misidentification as it becomes round in shape, different from its naturally flat shape. Additionally, when it is an adult it becomes brown in color, except after feeding when it takes on a dark red hue due to the intake of human blood.

Because of their miniscule size and innate ability to hide, bed bugs can enter the home in a multitude of ways, including any type of object that can be transferred from one home, apartment, condo, hotels, etc., to another. This transferability, coupled with their hyperactive reproduction, allows their wrath to be widespread very quickly, especially in homes that are older or have many cracks and crevices, messy cluttered homes, and homes where mattresses or pillows are not covered with some sort of allergen-reducing encasements. To get a feel of their ability to infest an entire house, here are some reproduction facts:

- Females lay eggs in clusters of 10-50 in just one day
- The eggs are whitish in color, pear shaped and approximately 1 mm in length
- A female will lay up 500 eggs during her lifetime
- Eggs hatch in 1-2 weeks time
- In one year's time, three generations of can be produced
- Newly hatched nymphs—as they are called—begin to feed on human blood immediately
- Nymphs are colorless and the size of a pinhead
- A nymph will go through five molting stages before becoming a full adult, feeding during each stage

Though these wingless vampires have been known to be brimming with pathogens—hepatitis B and plague included—they have not been shown to be a transmitter of disease. Unlike mosquitoes, they are not thought of as being a medical threat, making them more of an annoyance than anything else.

Some people try to live with bed bugs in their lives, though they often are covered with welts and scars from scratching all over their bodies. No distance is great enough to be protected once they have entered your home. They have been known to travel over 100 feet on their own to feed, making merely disinfecting your bed and using mattress and pillow covers a futile act.

In order to be fully rid of these pests, a home needs to be thoroughly cleaned, ensuring that every crease, crevice, floorboard, outlet and corner has been cleaned and rid of them and their eggs. Furthermore, every hole and crack should be filled and caulked, leaving little to no room for already existing eggs to penetrate the home. Once your house is rid of infestation, you should use a complete, zippered mattress encasement, a complete zippered pillow encasement, and a zippered encasement for your box spring. This traps any existing critters inside, essentially permanently removing them from their food source, and disallowing new bugs from hiding in their beloved hotbeds.

-Ben Anton, 2007

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About the Author

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