

Bed Bugs: Facts, Prevention, and Control

Bed bugs are making a comeback, and can be found just about anywhere in Alameda County—from homeless shelters to four-star hotel rooms. There is no consensus on the reasons their return, but these little bugs are determined to stick around. Although bed bugs are tiny, they can cause major headaches because they're so difficult to find and control.

Use these tips below to help control this stubborn pest.

BIOLOGY

Understanding how bed bugs feed and live can help you get rid of them.

- Adult bed bugs are flat, small (about a ¼ inch long), oval-shaped, wingless, and reddish brown. Immature bugs are smaller and translucent colored. Eggs are tiny and white.
- They feed on blood and temporarily attach themselves to their favorite meal: humans and animals. Bed bugs need blood to grow and reproduce.
- Bed bugs usually bite at night, while we are sleeping.
- Bed bugs move around by hitching rides on clothing, furniture, bedding, and baggage. Bed bugs will live in cracks or crevices in or around your sleeping areas.

HEALTH ISSUES

- Not known to transmit any disease.
- Bites can cause an allergic reaction with swelling, redness, and itching.
- Skin infection and scarring can result from scratching.
- Some people do not react to bed bug bites, and others may have a delayed response that is shortened after subsequent bites.
- Lack of sleep is a serious side-effect causing reduced alertness, loss of productivity, and mood problems.

PREVENTION

Bed bugs are hard to prevent because of their small size, night habits, and ability to hitchhike. Here are some tips to get you started:

- Be on the lookout for signs of infestations such as: waking up with bites; seeing live bugs; or dark red or black spots on bedding, carpets, walls and furniture. Finding bed bugs early is the key to preventing their spread.
- Paint and caulk around sleeping areas – such as along baseboards, windows and bed frames – to seal hiding spots. Peeling or bubbling wallpaper can provide homes to thousands of bed bugs.
- Inspect used furniture closely before bringing into your home, and the tiniest crack can harbor a bed bug. Look for signs of infestations in cushions, zippers, seams, and underneath including springs and frames. Use a magnifying glass if possible. Beware of items in alleys and dumpsters.
- Take a look around mattresses and furniture when staying in an unfamiliar place. Bed bugs can hitch a ride home on your clothing, accessories or luggage.
- Do not pick up used mattresses or furniture from the street. You may be unknowingly infesting your living space with these tiny hitchhikers.

CONTROL

Getting rid of bed bugs will require many different steps over several weeks. Be patient and persistent, and you will succeed.

- Hire a pest control professional. Eliminating bed bugs on your own is almost completely impossible and you may make the infestation worse.
- Find out where they are hiding. Bed bugs don't just stay in mattresses (though that is a favorite hiding spot after box springs). Look along baseboards, under and behind dressers, and any other dark hidden areas nearby. Monitoring devices, like glue boards or bed bug detectors, may be helpful to locate bed bugs.
- Vacuum infested areas carefully. This will reduce the number of live bugs. Remove vacuum bag or contents, place into a plastic bag, seal tightly, and dispose right away. Remember, vacuuming alone will not eliminate an infestation. You will want to vacuum up some talcum powder before and after vacuuming to keep bed bugs from sticking in your vacuum.
- Use hot steam on infested furniture and other surfaces to kill bugs and hidden eggs. Handheld steamers are widely available in stores and online. The steaming time depends on the steam temperature, i.e., the higher the temperature the faster the kill. Pass the steamer slowly over infested surfaces. Always use caution to avoid burns, or damaging items.
- Put mattress and box spring into a bed bug proof cover. These covers are tear resistant and have a tight locking zipper that keeps bed bugs from escaping, or entering. Leave cover on for at least one year and pull bed away from the wall. Keep bedding from touching the floor and change sheets often until the problem is eliminated.

- Wash all linen, laundry, and other infested clothing articles in hot water. Dry on the highest possible setting. Un-washable, and “dry clean only” items can be put in the dryer for at least 20 minutes to kill bed bugs and their eggs.
- You do not have to throw away furniture, including mattresses. Most items can be treated. Talk to your pest control professional before throwing anything out.
- Infested items left in common areas such as alleys, basements and curbs may spread the problem to others in your community. Mark or label any items that you are throwing out to prevent others from accidentally bringing bed bugs home.
- Do not use chemicals around sleeping areas and furniture unless they are properly labeled to treat these surfaces for bed bugs.
- If you are renting, notify your landlord about any sign of bed bugs immediately. You have the right to live in vermin-free housing. Work with your landlord to get problems corrected quickly and prevent the spread of bed bugs.

Remember, there is no magic formula that will guarantee bed bug elimination. These tips are not intended to replace a select treatment program by knowledgeable professionals. Pesticides may be part of most integrated pest management regimens to treat heavy infestations.