

Response to Bed Bugs: Panic vs. Reasonable Actions

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The first thing people think about when they hear the word bed bug is “Ewww!” The truth is, bed bugs do not discriminate and can affect all individuals, families and communities regardless of cleanliness, ethnic group, race, age or socioeconomic status.

Despite the fact that bed bugs have not been shown to transmit disease to humans, these cryptic, blood-feeding insects are associated with negative social, economic, psychological and public health impacts. It is through scientific education and myth-busting that Extension hopes to reach people so they are better equipped to protect themselves and prevent bed bug infestations, rather than spread fear, create anxiety and cause reactive responses.

Do Not Panic

Panic is the sudden uncontrollable fear or anxiety that often leads to erratic, sometimes unreasonable behavior. Panic associated with bed bugs include throwing away all furniture, spraying general pesticides in the bedroom and/or refusing to travel to any place, by any means, at any time. Please do not panic! Panic can make the situation worse.

How Bed Bugs Spread

Panic comes from not knowing and understanding the bed bug. We must get to know the pest before we can win the battle against bed bugs. Bed bugs may get more press from plaguing large



Various life stages and feeding status of bed bugs (magnified).



(actual size)

Photos by Jody Green, Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County

light brown and almost transparent — revealing a dark digestive tract. After a bed bug has fed, it turns a deep, dark red and its body will look less oval and more elongated.

This variation in shape, size and color, — depending on life stage and feeding status — often leads to the misidentification of bed bugs. If you see what looks like a bed bug, try to catch it without squishing it (if you squish it, blood or digested blood may spurt out) and have it identified. Many bugs found in the house are not bed bugs, and may be bat bugs, carpet beetles or other occasional home invaders.

Why and How Bed Bugs Bite

All bed bugs require a blood meal to survive. They locate their host by detecting exhaled carbon dioxide, usually when the host is sleeping. Bed bugs use their piercing-sucking mouthparts to pierce the skin and consume a bloodmeal, which takes 5–15 minutes.

Although bed bugs feed on the body, they do not live on the body. After feeding, the bed bug moves off the host to an undisturbed location, like the seam of a mattress or crevice of a bed frame. For the next 3–5 days, the engorged bed bug rests, digests and molts to the next stage of development, or as in the case of an adult female, lays eggs.

For some people, the bites from bed bugs result in itchy, red bumps, but for others, there is no evident reaction.

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What to Look for and Where to Look

Skin reactions may prompt individuals to investigate their surroundings to search for potential biting pests. Very carefully inspect the mattress (under the bed linens), box spring, bed frame looking closely at the seams, corners, folds, cracks and crevices. Pay particular attention to any dark, fecal spotting (digested blood), shed exoskeletons and live or dead bugs.

Introduction vs. Infestation

There is a difference between an introduction and infestation. Not every location with a bed bug discovery is an infestation. An introduction occurs when a bed bug is transported and dislodged from a place with an infestation. An infestation is when there

is a population of bed bugs which are regularly feeding, developing, breeding and multiplying.

Infestations are likely to occur in places where there are regular sleeping humans, such as an apartment building, hotel, college dorm, summer camp cabin or long-term care facility. Places where introductions can occur are endless, but it is uncommon for an infestation to occur in places that do not have a consistent food source (i.e., sleeping humans). It is important to understand that bed bugs have been introduced from an infestation site, and it is the infested location that needs to be treated.

Reasonable Preventive Measures

- Communicate with others about bed bug experiences.
- Perform inspection and preventative measures when traveling (See “Bed

Bugs: Souvenirs to Avoid When Traveling” online at <https://lancaster.unl.edu/pest>).

- Practice regular sanitation at home: Declutter, vacuum, wipe down surfaces and monitor for signs of infestation.
- Reduce the number of belongings brought into suspected locations.
- Inspect furniture and items (new, used and borrowed) before bringing them into the house.
- For fabrics that can be heat treated, heat in home dryer on high for 30 minutes.
- Suspected items can be bagged and kept in freezer for 4–7 days.
- Store luggage, purses, backpacks away from bedrooms.
- Install bedbug interceptors/pitfall traps around beds to monitor/prevent bed bugs from crawling from the floor to beds.