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Polk County Health Department

BED BUGS Fact Sheet

Bed bugs are small insects without wings. They are currently found in all 50 states, including Iowa. Bed bugs are not known to spread disease but the bites usually will cause large itchy welts on the skin, which may not appear for 24 to 48 hours after the bite. They are most often found around areas where people sleep or rest.

What are bed bugs?

They are small insects without wings. Adult bed bugs look similar to a tick and have flat copper colored bodies that are about ¼ inch long. Young bed bugs are nearly colorless and very small. Bed bugs mostly feed on the blood of humans.



Where are bed bugs found?

They are most often found in areas where people sleep. Adult bed bugs or evidence of their presence can be found with the aid of a flashlight and careful inspection. Small bloodstains from crushed bed bugs or dark brown spots from bed bug droppings may be seen on mattresses. Because young bed bugs shed their skin several times, the “empty shells” may also be seen.

Why are bed bugs such a problem now?

During the 1940s and 1950s bed bugs were common and developing countries effectively used DDT to control them. But bans of the pesticide and other toxic chemicals that are harmful to humans, wildlife, and plants resulted in an explosion of bed bugs in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East by the mid 1990s. International travel has allowed bed bugs to ride in suitcases to other countries.

Why don't people see bed bugs?

Bed bugs are most active between midnight and 3 am. They are rarely active during daylight hours, and only come out when they sense the warmth and odors of a body at rest. Because of their small, flat bodies, they can hide in the cracks and crevices of mattresses, bedding, furniture, and draperies, and are difficult to spot without careful inspection.

Are bed bugs dangerous?

Bed bugs do not transmit disease. However, bed bug bites can cause large itchy welts on the skin. A person's reaction to insect bites is an immune response and can vary widely from person to person. The bites themselves are usually painless and rarely awaken a sleeping person.

Will bed bugs bite my pets?

Bed bugs will feed on pets, but prefer to feed on humans. Pet sleeping areas should be inspected and treated by a licensed pest control company. Be sure to ask about the safety of the treatment options for pets and humans in the house.

How long do bed bugs live?

The typical life span of a bed bug is between 10 months and one year. In general, bed bugs seek a meal of blood every four or five days. However, they can survive for weeks to several months without eating.

What should I do if I find bed bugs?

Some of your options include contacting your landlord to determine a plan of action, treating the bed bugs yourself, or hiring a pest control professional. Bed bugs can be a persistent and frustrating problem and professional extermination can be expensive. There are **things that you can do** to help control a bed bug infestation. Remember, getting rid of bed bugs on your own is not a quick or easy process. Controlling and removing bed bugs involves different procedures than the removal of other pests and will require multiple visits if done by a pest control professional. It is important to cooperate fully with all of the pest control professional's recommendations. See the next page for treatment options.

Should children be excluded from school and activities if they are bitten by bed bugs?

Children should not be excluded from school or activities. Bed bugs are pests, similar to cockroaches, in that they affect the quality of people's lives but do not cause disease.

Are there laws or codes about bed bugs?

The City of Des Moines Rental Code prohibits any type of bug or insect infestation. Tenants should report bed bugs to the building manager or report it to the City of Des Moines. If you do not live in Des Moines, check with your jurisdiction if their Rental Code includes bug infestations. There are no current local health regulations that give the health department authority to enforce bed bug eradication. If you are having difficulty dealing with a landlord regarding extermination responsibilities, HOME Incorporated is an agency that will help mediate problems between landlords and tenants, 515-243-1277.

Prevention

Bed bugs generally enter the home when carried in on clothes or in luggage. Follow these tips when traveling and bringing home furniture.

- When staying in a hotel peel back the bedsheets and check the mattress, running your fingers along the upper and lower seams. Look for bed bugs, bed bug “skin shells”, and dark blood stains. Also check the headboard area (look for tiny black spots that are smaller than poppy seeds, this is bed bug excrement). Check all other furniture, including bedside tables and drawers.
- Elevate luggage to keep them off the floor, such as on a luggage rack.
- Hang all clothing. Leave nothing lying on the bed or furniture and avoid unpacking clothing and storing it in the hotel’s drawers.
- While you pack to leave check luggage and clothing carefully looking for bed bugs and bug droppings.
- Launder clothing in hot water immediately and scrub luggage with a stiff brush or vacuum the bag after return to remove any eggs.
- Carefully examine any secondhand furniture, bedding, or beds before bringing home.
- De-clutter your home. If you are not using things or clothing, remove them to prevent hiding places for bed bugs.
- Move your bed away from the wall.

Treatment

Steps to control a bed bug infestation on your own

- Do not use bug bombs or other sprays. They are not effective at killing bed bugs and you could poison your family and pets. Never use a pesticide indoors that is intended for outdoor use.
- Use a flashlight to find where the bed bugs are hiding. Check the following areas: along the mattress and box spring seams; between the mattress and box springs; behind wall-mounted objects and headboards; inside cracks and crevices of upholstered and wooden furniture; and in cracks in wood molding or behind baseboards.
- Use a hair dryer at the high heat setting and run it over baseboards to drive out the bed bugs. Use the vacuum to suck them up.
- Steam-clean furniture and any areas where the bugs might be. Bed bugs will die, along with the eggs, when subjected to high heat (>120° F).
- Scrub infested surfaces (mattress, box spring, bed frame, couch, etc.) with a stiff brush to remove eggs.
- Mattresses and box springs can be enclosed in a zippered mattress cover that has no tears or holes. Trapped bugs will eventually die. This should be left in place for a year or more as bed bugs can live for long periods without feeding.
- Wash clothing and bedding in hot water and dry at the high setting. Seal clean clothing in containers until the infestation is eliminated.
- Dust all cracks and crevices along baseboards and other openings with food grade diatomaceous earth to kill bed bugs. Food grade diatomaceous earth is safe for people and pets.
- Seal holes and crevices in walls.
- Purchase bed bug monitors or use metal lids dusted with talc or put double-stick or duct tape (sticky side out) around the bed frame legs to catch the bugs climbing up – pull bed away from wall and do not allow bedding to touch the floor.
- Remove drawers from furniture and clean, and turn furniture over to inspect and clean.
- Vacuum up any live or dead bed bugs. Seal up the waste and put in outside trash containers immediately.
- If your furniture or bed is infested beyond control, discard it immediately. Wrap the item in plastic so the bugs do not fall off when transporting it. When disposing of an infested item, mark it as infested with bed bugs so it will not be acquired by someone else, infecting their home. This is very important to the success of getting rid of bed bugs.

Professional Pest Control

A licensed pest control operator with experience in controlling bed bug populations may be able to work with you on a plan to manage the infestation in a residence. They may use a combination of chemical and heat and/or freezing treatments. Ask the pest control operator about any negative side effects of treating your home with chemicals, as the chemicals can remain in your home long after they’ve been used. It is also important to note that bed bugs have become resistant to many of the pesticides previously used to treat them, making other options such as heat more effective.

Local Pest Control Services experienced in multiple methods of bed bug control

Preferred Pest Control, Inc., 515-276-7277
Springer Pest Solutions, 515-223-9336
Plunkett’s Pest Control, 515-266-3687

Pest-Pro, 515-371-7349
AQ Allstate Pest Control, 515-223-026
Paul’s Pest Control, 515-262-8678