



Residential, Structural & Community Pests

Department of Entomology • NC Cooperative Extension

TIPS FOR PREVENTING THE SPREAD OF BED BUGS

By: Michael Waldvogel and Patricia Alder, Entomology Extension

In many cases, bed bug problems start when they “hitch-hike” in our luggage or other items during trips and stays at hotels and rental properties or if our jobs take us into potentially infested dwellings. 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 signs 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.

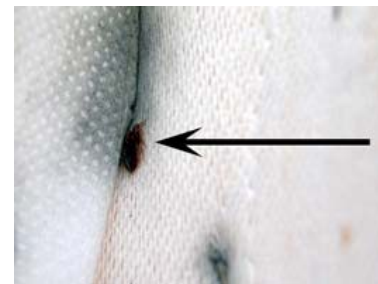


Adult bed bug (Univ. of Kentucky)

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 can you do to reduce the likelihood of picking up “hitch-hiking bed bugs”?

- Carry some plastic trash bags in your luggage. You can also enclose your clothing and other items in trash bags inside your luggage.
- Don't place luggage on beds or on the floor near beds. Some hotels have fold-out luggage stands. These stands are not “bed bug proof” but you can check them for signs of bed bugs particularly where the webbing wraps around the frame. Another option is to keep your luggage in bathtub.
- Avoid spraying pesticides in your hotel/vacation room. Remember, you are not the only guest who has used (or will use) the room and many people are sensitive to pesticides. The management of your guest accommodation likely has a pest control program in place and any spraying you may do can be both hazardous and actually disruptive to their pest control efforts.



Bed bug (arrow) and fecal stains on a mattress (NCSU-Entomology)

- Some people may want to inspect their mattress & box spring for signs of activity. Remember that spotting does not necessarily mean that it's bed bug feces OR that there is a current bed bug problem. Many places are now using mattress encasements. Do not open the encasement because it may be difficult to reseal and so compromise its effectiveness.

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 that you spray occupied rooms with pesticides.
- Place your clothing and other items (such as towels, bed linen, etc., if you brought such items with you) back into your luggage or into trash bags. If possible, place your 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. Do not spray your clothing or luggage with pesticides.
- 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 feeding 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.
- Upon arriving home, avoid opening and unpacking your bags and luggage except where you can contain the contents. For example, open them outdoors, 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.
- 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.



Be careful where you keep luggage during any travel.

- 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. You can also use "Pest Strips" containing "Vapona" or DDVP in place of sprays; however, do not store items containing DDVP strips in rooms that are regularly occupied (i.e., bedrooms, living-rooms, etc.) or used by children or the elderly. 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, but that really depends on whether the temperature throughout the car exceeds about 120°F. Bear in mind that clothing and other items bunched inside trash bags inside your car may actually insulate bed bugs and their eggs. So, just because you the thermometer may show the temperature as close to 120° F does not necessarily mean that your belongings 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 additional information, also see:

Bed Bugs - Insect Note - ENT/rsc-31

Preparing Your Home For A Bed Bug Treatment - Insect Note - ENT/rsc-40

Information is also available on the web at: <http://insects.ncsu.edu/Urban/biting.htm>

Any mention of brand names or listing of commercial products or services in the publication does not imply endorsements by the North Carolina Cooperative Extension nor discrimination against similar products or services. All recommendations for pesticide use were legal at the time of publication, but the status of registrations and use patterns are subject to change by actions of state and federal regulatory agencies. Before applying any chemical, always obtain current information about its use and read the product label carefully. For assistance, contact the Cooperative Extension Center in your county.

North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T State University commit themselves to positive action to secure equal opportunity regardless of race, color, creed, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status or disability. In addition, the two Universities welcome all persons without regard to sexual orientation.