

# Bed bug bites

## What are bed bugs?

Bed bugs are small wingless blood-sucking insects about 4 to 5 mm long that belong to the arthropod family of insects and are notorious for infesting the skin of humans. The family also includes the louse and the scabies mite. The two main species of bed bug that bite humans are the common bed bug, *Cimex lectularius*, and the tropical bed bug, *Cimex hemipterus*.

They are roughly oval in shape and flattened so being thin they can hide easily in narrow cracks and crevices and are therefore very difficult to detect. They also move very quickly. Bed bugs, as the name indicates, are attracted to beds and bedding including sleeping bags where they seek human blood at night. They are rust brown in colour and change to a darker red brown following a meal of blood.

## Where are bed bugs found?

In the past bed bug infestation was a frequent problem especially in unhygienic living conditions including low-standard accommodation facilities. However, like lice infestation bed bugs can affect people from all walks of life if they are exposed to the bugs. Nowadays it is a major problem related to international travel. The bugs travel in baggage and often hide in luggage, clothing, bedding (especially in the seams of mattresses) and furniture. They are most often found in dwellings with a high occupancy turnover such as hotels, motels, hostels, shelters and backpacker accommodation.

## What is the life cycle of bed bugs?

There are 5 'baby' stages known as nymphs before the bug reaches adulthood. The nymph development takes 6 to 8 weeks and each stage requires at least one meal of blood to moult to the next stage. The adults can live on average for 6 to 12 months. The female lays eggs in hidden areas and they hatch in about 10 days. The bugs, which have special adapted mouthparts for piercing skin and sucking blood, seek out humans at night for their meal and then withdraw to their hiding places. They are attracted to heat and carbon dioxide, not dirt.

## What are the typical symptoms of bed bug bites?

Bed bugs commonly target the shoulders and arms but will bite anywhere on the body. The bites are often seen on the neck, shoulders, arms, torso and legs. The bite is painless but the features of the bites include:

- itchiness
- large wheals which reduce to a red mark then gradually fade
- bites in orderly rows of 3 or more (along superficial veins)
- redness of skin
- localised swelling
- development of blisters.

The bites may be worse if there is an allergic reaction to the bug and therefore the effect varies between individuals.

The diagnosis is confirmed by identifying specimens collected from the infested residence. Look for reddish spots on mattresses.

## How are the bites treated?

Helpful suggestions include:

- cleaning the bite marks with antiseptic soap
- resisting the urge to scratch
- applying an anti-itch preparation such as
  - calamine lotion
  - an anaesthetic cream, or
  - a cortisone cream
- applying an ice pack often to relieve swelling
- taking pain-killing medication if necessary.

## How is a bed bug infestation controlled?

The following can be attempted.

- Thoroughly clean, wash and vacuum all surfaces and bedding.
- Wash bedding and affected clothing in hot water and dry on the hot cycle of the clothes dryer.
- Steam clean carpets.
- Vacuum mattresses, seal in dark plastic and leave outside in the hot sun for as long as possible.
- Spray a surface insecticide on common hiding spots such as in wall cracks and crevices, skirting boards, between the cracks of wooden floors, carpet and breaks in wallpaper (do not treat bedding with insecticide).

## Pest control professional

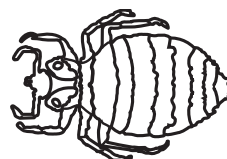
It is worth hiring the services of a licensed pest controller experienced in treating these insects.

## Prevention of infestation

This is difficult but can be helped by having high standards of housekeeping and home maintenance. Be careful of bringing luggage and second-hand items such as bedding and furniture into the home.

### Important points

- Bed bugs rarely transmit disease.
- They are commonly found on beds or mattresses.
- They hide by day and become active at night.
- Bites are in a line of about 3 or more.
- Bites are large, red and itchy wheals.



The bed bug (under a microscope)