

“Sleep Tight. Don’t Let the Bed Bugs Bite!”

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We’ve all heard this saying from our childhood and even as adults. It’s been part of our culture for generations, and comes from a time, mostly before World War II, when bed bugs were common in homes and elsewhere. We often thought by saying this phrase or having it said to us that we would be magically protected as we slept.

Since the 1950s, we’ve not had to worry much about bed bugs. But this is rapidly changing. In just the past three to four years, many major cities in Ohio have reported a dramatic increase in bed bug infestations – particularly in hotels, motels, apartments, dormitories, prisons, and even private residences. Having bed bugs is not a reflection of poor hygiene or bad housekeeping, as was once thought.

So why have bed bugs returned? While bed bugs were practically eliminated in the United States in the 1950s, other areas of the world did not see a similar decline. Changes in pesticide types, use, and resistance, along with increased international travel and commerce are all thought to contribute to the new spread of bed bugs in the United States. Bed bugs can easily hitchhike in luggage, clothing, bedding, and furniture, thereby infesting airplanes, ships, trains, buses, and various dwelling places.

What are bed bugs? Bed bugs are insects that feed on human blood. They are often found near sleeping areas and feed typically at night. Most people are hardly aware of being bitten until small red marks or welts appear. Some people have more of an allergic reaction to the bites, similar to those caused by mosquitoes – swelling and itching. Adult bed bugs are brown to reddish-brown in color and are quite small, about the size of an apple seed (1/4 – 3/8 –inch long). Their small size and flat shape allow them to fit into the smallest of spaces, such as mattress seams, box springs, cracks and crevices in bed frames, behind baseboards, pictures, wallpaper, and electrical outlets.

Can bed bugs cause disease? They are not known to transmit disease, but as mentioned earlier, their bites can cause allergic reactions and may itch for up to two weeks before healing. The urge to scratch should be resisted as it may cause a secondary, bacterial infection. So it is important to wash the bites and your hands with soap and water to reduce the risk of infection.

How long do bed bugs live? Female bed bugs lay from 1-12 eggs per day. The developmental time from egg to adult is affected by temperature and could be from 21 days at 86° F to 120 days at 65° F. The young and adults can live for several months without food, with the adult’s lifespan being between 12-18 months.

How can bed bugs be prevented? Inspect new and used furniture before bringing it into a home by looking at areas along seams, around buttons, and under cushions. When traveling and before unpacking, look for signs of bed bugs, such as fecal spots left on mattresses (these look like tiny dark spots as if someone touched a dark magic marker to the fabric). Also examine the mattress seams and other furniture near the bed. It is best not to stay in a hotel room if you see evidence of

bed bugs as there is an increased risk of them stowing away in luggage, clothing, and other items.

What is the best way to get rid of bed bugs? There is no one easy method to use against bed bugs. Once bed bugs have been found, a professional pest control specialist should be called in. Prior to the services of a pest control professional, remove items such as pictures, books, and clothing so there are fewer places for the bugs to hide. Vacuuming will remove some of the bed bugs, but will not remove the eggs. Concentrate the vacuuming to mattress seams and around any tufts or buttons. Infested items (clothing, shoes, bedding, and blankets) can be placed in a clothes dryer on high heat for 20 minutes to kill the bugs and eggs. Mattresses and box springs can be enclosed in a bed bug-proof zippered cover to kill the bugs inside. The cover should be kept on for more than one year because bed bugs can survive for a long time without feeding. Pesticides should only be applied by a licensed professional as improper self-application of pesticides can be dangerous and may even make the problem worse. For example, bug bombs are not effective and may scatter bed bugs to other rooms or neighboring apartments. Also, repellents such as DEET do not work.

Where is more information available on bed bugs? Good sources of information on bed bugs, which were also used for this article, can be located on the following websites:

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at:
www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/publications/bed_bugs_cdc-epa_statement.htm
- The Ohio Department of Health at:
www.odh.ohio.gov/odhprograms/dis/zoonoses/vbdp/bedbug.aspx
- The Ohio State University Extension Service at:
<http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/2000/2105.html>

Any questions can be directed to our Environmental Health Division at 330-723-9523. For more information about our other services and programs, please call 330-723-9688 or toll-free at 1-888-723-9688. You can also visit us at www.medinahhealth.org. Services of the Medina County Health Department are partially funded by your local health levy.