

What to do about Bed Bugs

A fact sheet from the Allentown Health Bureau

What are Bed Bugs?

Bed bugs are small, flat and wingless insects. Like mosquitoes, they feed on blood from people or animals such as cats, dogs and birds. Usually they are round and reddish brown in appearance, about the size of a lentil or apple seed. Young bed bugs will be smaller and lighter in color.



This is a picture of an adult bed bug.

Usually found in or near beds, they hide during the day and become active at night when they feed. They can live months without a meal.

Bed bugs are not known to spread disease to people. But the bites can cause itching and rashes which may become infected if you scratch them. Some people are allergic to the bites, which causes more severe symptoms.

Where are they found?

Bed bugs are often found in hotels, motels, shelters, apartment buildings and anywhere large numbers of people live or visit. Bed bugs hide in small cracks in furniture, wood floors and baseboards, behind wall paper and pictures, in mattresses, in pillows and clutter.

How can they get into my house?

Bed bugs can come into your house on luggage, clothing, boxes and other objects, but especially on used mattresses and furniture. Don't bring used furniture, beds or mattresses into your home without being certain they came from a trusted source. Never pick up furniture or mattresses that were placed out for trash collection.

How do I know if I have them?

Usually the first sign of bed bugs is red, itchy bites on your skin, often on arms and shoulders. They tend to make their bites in rows, often in three's. Other insects bite randomly. You might see the bugs in your bed along the seams of the mattress or between the mattress and box spring. Blood stains or dark spots of insect waste may be seen on sheets or where they are hiding. If there are a lot of bed bugs, a sweet odor may be noticeable.

How do I get rid of them?

Bed bugs are tough and it may be difficult to get rid of them. But there are some things you can do to help remove them from your home:

- Remove trash and clean up clutter in your home where they can hide.
- Wash all your sheets, blankets, pillows and stuffed animals in the hot wash cycle. Dry them in the hot cycle. Keep them off the bed until you take care of the mattress.
- Clean and vacuum all furniture, especially in the cracks.
- Vacuum floors and baseboards, especially in the cracks.
- After vacuuming anything, put the vacuum bag in a tightly tied plastic trash bag and put it in a garbage can outside.

- Many people decide to throw out their mattress. If so, use a black marker and write BED BUGS on it to warn anyone that might think about bringing it into their own home.
- If you can't afford to throw it out, you can buy a mattress cover. This will keep the bed bugs locked inside until they die. Keep the mattress cover on for a whole year to be safe.
- Vacuuming or steaming the mattress may help if you only have a minor infestation.
- Mattresses can be treated with a pesticide specifically approved for mattresses. Read below for more information.
- Place smaller articles in a black plastic bag out in the hot sun for several days if it is summer. The heat will kill the bed bugs. In the winter, they can be placed out during a hard freeze.

Extermination

Most treatment plans that are successful at getting rid of bed bugs include professional extermination. It is very difficult for most people to completely eliminate bed bugs by themselves. The cost for professional extermination varies by the size of the job and by the type of treatment provided. Request an estimate and compare the service and price quotes of different companies. Be sure to follow the pest control company's advice when preparing to have your home treated.

What if I can't afford an exterminator?

There are several over-the-counter pesticides that can be purchased from pest control companies and other retail stores. But you must be very careful if you decide to use them. If they are not used correctly, you may expose yourself or your family to toxic chemicals that could cause breathing problems or other health issues. Read and follow the label completely. **Only use the pesticide on mattresses if it is labeled for use on mattresses.** Make sure your family and pets are not exposed to the chemical while you treat your home. Wear disposable gloves and long sleeves and pants to protect yourself while you apply the chemical. Do not inhale the pesticide vapors. Take a shower after applying the pesticide. Allow the chemical to dry before you return to the areas that were treated. Again, follow the label instructions carefully.

What if I have more questions?

Allentown residents can call the Allentown Health Bureau at 610-437-7759 for more information on bed bugs.