



# Frequently asked questions about Bed Bugs

**From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency  
Division of Environmental Health**

**What is a bed bug?** The common bedbug is a 6 legged, reddish-brown insect that doesn't grow much more than a half centimeter (1/5 inch) in length. Bedbugs inject an anticoagulant to keep your blood flowing as they suck, along with an anesthetic agent to keep you from feeling them when they're at work.



**Do bedbugs spread disease?** To date, bedbugs aren't known to spread disease to humans. However, there seems to be more reports of their activity, mostly due to an increase in foreign travel and changing pest-control practices.

**How do you know if you have a problem?** Bedbug-bite signs and symptoms will usually only affect the surface of the skin, appearing as small itchy red bumps. You might find the bumps in a linear or clustered fashion, indicative of repeated feedings by a single bedbug.

Some individuals may develop allergic reactions or larger skin reactions such as:

- Large, itchy wheals up to 20 cm across (8 inches)
- Blister-like skin inflammations
- Groups of small, swollen sacs of pus
- Skin rashes similar to hives



**What about my pets?** Bedbugs will feed on any mammal, including cows and dogs. In North America, migratory bird species and bats have been sources of infestation.

**Why am I seeing them now?** More recently, as world travel has increased, bedbugs are finding vehicles into the home through luggage and clothing worn abroad. Another contributor to the resurgence of bedbugs in the U.S. is changing pest-control practices. Sixty years ago the common use of DDT — which kills most insects — nearly eliminated bedbugs in the United States. Exterminators also commonly treated headboards in the bedroom. DDT is not used today in the U.S. due to health concerns. Further, current extermination practices are more insect-specific — what's toxic to a cockroach may not kill a bedbug.

**Are some areas more likely to have them?** Factors that will increase your chances of suffering a bedbug infestation:

- **Climate.** Bedbugs thrive in tropical areas, although they can be found in all climates.
- **Type of housing.** Infestation is more likely in apartments and homeless shelters, which often have high turnover — than in single-family homes.
- **Living with pets.** Cats and dogs can carry bedbugs into the home.

**Is there anything I can do to NOT get them?** The mobile nature of bed bugs limits their prevention. Avoiding them is especially difficult in hotels, motels, and apartments because occupants and their belongings are constantly changing. The more people moving in and out, the more likely they will come in with someone or their belongings. You should be wary of buying secondhand beds, bedding,

and furniture. If you do buy these items, at a minimum you should examine them closely before you bring them into your home or apartment. Warehouses, storage facilities, trucks and railroad cars may be infested so common bed bugs can infest homes by stowing away on new furniture stored or shipped from these places.

**Ok, I'm pretty sure they're around, how do I find them and more important, how do I get rid of them?** Things to look for are the bugs themselves, and the light-brown, molted skins of the nymphs (babies). Dark spots of dried bed bug excrement (poop) are often present along mattress seams or wherever the bugs have lived. Oftentimes the gauze fabric underlying the box spring must be removed to gain access for inspection and possible treatment. Successful treatment of mattresses and box springs is difficult, however, and infested components may need to be discarded. Cracks and crevices of bed frames should be examined, especially if the frame is wood. (Bed bugs tend to live on wood and fabric more so than metal or plastic). Headboards secured to walls should also be removed and inspected. In hotels and motels, the area behind the headboard is often the first place that the bugs locate. Bed bugs also hide among items stored under beds. Nightstands and dressers should be emptied and examined inside and out, then tipped over to inspect the woodwork underneath. Oftentimes the bugs will be hiding in cracks and corners.

Upholstered chairs and sofas should be checked, especially seams, tufts, skirts, and crevices beneath cushions. Sofas can be major bed bug hotspots when used for sleeping.



Other common places to find bed bugs include: along and under the edge of wall-to-wall carpeting (especially behind beds and furniture); cracks in wood molding; ceiling-wall junctures; behind wall-mounts, picture frames, switch plates and outlets; under loose wallpaper; amongst clothing stored in closets; and inside clocks, phones, televisions and smoke detectors.

The challenge is to find and treat all places where bugs and eggs may be present. Bed bugs tend to congregate in certain areas, but it is common to find an individual or some eggs scattered here and there. Persistence and a bright flashlight are required for success. Professional Inspectors sometimes also inject a pyrethrum-based, "flushing agent" into crevices to help reveal where bugs may be hiding. A thorough treatment of a home, hotel, or apartment may take several hours or days.

**For more information about bed bugs and other treatment information can be found by visiting our web site at:**

[www.bhsj.org](http://www.bhsj.org)

**Or call your local Health Department office at:**

**Coldwater**  
517-279-9561 x 106

**Hillsdale**  
517-437-7395 x 111

**St. Joseph County**  
269-273-2161 x233