

IN-DEPTH GUIDE

Bed bugs: the complete homeowner's guide

Everything a homeowner needs in one place, based on public guidance from the U.S. EPA and CDC, with links to every source.

PestGuardCo.com · To reach an independent local pest control company, call (855) 424-9709.

> Plain-language summary of public guidance from the U.S. EPA and CDC · Updated November 2026

Check these first

1. **Pull back the sheets** and look at the mattress seams, piping and tags with a flashlight.
2. **Look for small dark spots** (like marker dots) on sheets, the mattress and the box spring. That's bed bug droppings.
3. **Check the headboard, bed frame joints and nightstand**, especially cracks and screw holes.
4. **Look for live bugs**: flat, reddish-brown, about the size of an apple seed. Young ones are smaller and paler.
5. **Look for shed skins and tiny white eggs** in seams and corners.

6 **Think back**: recent trip, used furniture, or a neighbor with bed bugs?

If you see this, it usually means...

IF YOU SEE

Bites in a line or cluster after sleeping

IT USUALLY MEANS

Possibly bed bugs, though bites alone can't confirm it

NEXT STEP

Look for the bugs, spots or skins to be sure.

IF YOU SEE

Tiny dark spots on sheets or mattress

IT USUALLY MEANS

Bed bug droppings

NEXT STEP

Check seams and the bed frame closely with a flashlight.

IF YOU SEE

Small rust or blood smears on sheets

IT USUALLY MEANS

Bugs crushed while you slept

NEXT STEP

Strip the bed, bag the bedding and wash and dry on high heat.

IF YOU SEE

Bugs only in one piece of furniture

IT USUALLY MEANS

An early or contained problem

NEXT STEP

Don't move that item to other rooms; it can spread them.

IF YOU SEE

Signs in several rooms

IT USUALLY MEANS

A spreading infestation

NEXT STEP

This usually needs a pest control company.

How to tell what you have

Bed bug

Flat, oval, reddish-brown, about the size of an apple seed. No wings. Hides in seams and cracks.

Bites usually show up after sleeping, often in rows.

vs

Carpet beetle or flea

Carpet beetles are round and patterned; fleas are tiny, dark and jump.

Fleas usually bite ankles and are linked to pets. Carpet beetles don't bite.

SIZE

About 3/16 in., like an apple seed

COLOR

Reddish-brown

WHERE

Mattress seams, headboards, sofas

WHEN

All year

Confirm it first

Bites alone can't confirm bed bugs; other insects and skin conditions cause similar marks. Look for the bugs themselves, their dark droppings, shed skins or eggs, mostly within a few feet of where people sleep.

EPA suggests comparing what you find with photos or showing a sample to your local extension office. A clear tape lift or a sealed bag with a sample helps.

Don't panic, and don't reach for the spray can

EPA's top tips start with: don't panic and don't throw everything out. Most belongings can be treated. Think through your options before using any product.

A combined approach works better than spraying alone: reduce clutter, wash and heat-dry fabrics, vacuum, encase the mattress and box spring, and seal cracks where bugs hide.

Heat and cold

A clothes dryer on high heat kills bed bugs in items that can take it. A home freezer is often not cold enough; EPA notes items need to be sealed in a bag in a freezer set to 0°F for at least three days.

Don't try to heat the whole house with the thermostat, space heaters or a fireplace. It doesn't work and can be dangerous.

Prepare for treatment

Whether you hire a company or not, preparation matters: cut clutter, bag and launder bedding and clothes, move the bed at least 6 inches from the wall, and keep bedding off the floor.

Ask the company for its prep list and follow it closely. Ask how many visits they plan and how they'll check that the bugs are gone.

Choosing a company

EPA recommends a company with a good reputation that uses an integrated approach (IPM), not just spraying. Your state pesticide agency can tell you what credentials pest control companies need in your state.

Ask what the plan covers, how many follow-up visits are included, and what you need to do between visits.

What to do and what to avoid

Do

- Strip the bed. Put bedding in a sealed plastic bag, then wash and dry on the highest heat the fabric allows.
- Vacuum the mattress seams, bed frame and floor around the bed, then seal the vacuum bag and throw it out outside.
- Pull the bed a few inches from the wall and keep bedding off the floor.
- Put mattress and box spring encasements on, if you have them.
- Cut clutter around the bed. It gives bed bugs more places to hide.

Avoid

- × Don't use foggers or "bug bombs". EPA warns they don't reach bed bugs in cracks and can be a fire and health hazard.
- × Don't use rubbing alcohol, kerosene or gasoline. They can ignite.
- × Don't move to the couch or another bedroom. Bed bugs follow and spread.
- × Don't throw out furniture in a panic. Most items can be treated, and dragging them out can spread bugs.

Health and safety

- EPA, CDC and USDA consider bed bugs a public health pest. They aren't known to spread disease.
- Bites can itch badly and some people react strongly. The bigger toll is often lost sleep and stress.
- Scratching bites can lead to skin infections. Ask a doctor or pharmacist about anything that looks infected.

Prevention checklist

- When traveling, keep luggage off the bed and floor; use the luggage rack and check it first.
- Unpack straight into the washer when you get home, and dry on high heat.
- Check used furniture, mattresses and couches closely before bringing them in.
- Use mattress and box spring encasements and check them for tears.
- In shared laundry rooms, carry clothes in plastic bags and fold at home.
- Keep clutter down, especially in bedrooms.

When to call a pro

Call a pro if you've confirmed bed bugs, see signs in more than one room, or still find bugs after washing and vacuuming.

1

Inspection

Confirming it's bed bugs and finding every room and item involved.

2

Prep list

A list of what to wash, bag and move before treatment. Following it closely makes a big difference.

3

Treatment

Often a combination: heat, vacuuming, steam, encasements and targeted products in cracks and seams.

4

Follow-up

Return visits, because eggs can hatch after the first treatment.

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Questions

Can I see bed bugs with my eyes?

Yes. Adults are about the size of an apple seed. Young ones are smaller and paler, and eggs are tiny and white, so a flashlight helps.

Do bed bugs mean my house is dirty?

No. Bed bugs travel on luggage, furniture and clothing and turn up in clean homes and hotels too. Clutter just gives them more places to hide.

Will washing my sheets get rid of them?

It helps with the bedding, but bed bugs also hide in the mattress, frame, furniture and cracks. That's why a full plan is usually needed.

How long can bed bugs live without feeding?

EPA notes they can survive several months to a year without a meal, so leaving a room empty for a while usually doesn't work.

Sources

Bed Bugs: Get Them Out and Keep Them Out (https://www.epa.gov/bedbugs) **U.S. EPA**

Bed Bug Prevention, Detection and Control (https://www.epa.gov/bedbugs/bed-bug-prevention-detection-and-control) **U.S. EPA**

Citizen's Guide to Pest Control and Pesticide Safety (https://www.epa.gov/safepestcontrol/citizens-guide-pest-control-and-pesticide-safety) **U.S. EPA**

This guide is PestGuard's own plain-language summary of public guidance from U.S. government agencies (EPA and CDC). U.S. federal government publications are generally in the public domain; follow the links to read the originals. It is general information, not an official government publication and not a substitute for an inspection. If you use any pest control product, read and follow the label. In an emergency, call 911. For pesticide questions, the National Pesticide Information Center can help: 1-800-858-7378.