Bed Bugs in the Workplace



What are bed bugs?

Bed bugs are small, oval shaped, wingless insects. The bugs are about the size of apple seeds. The eggs are white, and are found in clusters. The eggs are about the size of a pin head. The flattened bodies of bed bugs allow them to hide in very small places such as seams of mattresses, cracks, crevices, electrical outlets, box springs, bed frames, headboards, behind wallpaper, or in any other objects around a bed or on the floor. Bed bugs cannot climb metal or polished surfaces and are not able to fly or jump.

Bed bugs typically feed on a diet consisting solely of blood once a week, but they can live months without feeding. They have about a one-year life span during which time females can lay up to 200-400 eggs which hatch in about 10 days. The bugs usually come out at night to feed on the blood of people and animals, biting their victims as they sleep.

How can infestation occur?

Bed bugs move very quickly and can travel through hallways, plumbing, and electrical lines. They can climb into bags or on clothing. They usually feed at night and hide during the day. These insects prefer darkness and tend to hide near the bed. They travel up to 20 feet in search of a human host.

Who is at risk?

Bed bugs can be found anywhere that humans live or visit. Bed bugs can be unknowingly brought into the workplace by employees, custodial staff, visitors, customers, vendors, clients, and others.

Workers potentially at higher risk are those who handle bedding, clothing, or furniture where bed bugs could be hiding. These occupations include fire fighters, health care professionals, housing management staff, housekeeping and custodial staff, police, and social workers who work in or visit hospitals, long-term care facilities, shelters, rooming houses, hotels, motels and residences.

What are the symptoms?

Bed bugs are not known to spread diseases and the bites do not usually require any medical treatment. One way to identify a bed bug infestation is by the bite marks on the face, neck, arms, hands, or any other body parts while sleeping. However, a bed bug bite can take as long as 14 days to appear, depending on the person.

When bed bugs bite, they inject an anesthetic and an anticoagulant that prevents a person from realizing they are being bitten. Some people do not react at all to the bites, while others may have small skin reactions. The bite marks are similar to that of a mosquito or a flea; slightly swollen and red area that may itch and be irritating. In rare cases, some people may have severe allergic reactions.

To avoid infection, try not to scratch the bites and keep the bite sites clean. Using antiseptic creams or lotions, as well as antihistamines, may help. Talk to your health care provider for advice.

How do I find bed bugs?

Some workplaces are susceptible to bed bugs, or perhaps you will find them while working in a client's home or when travelling for work.

Seeing bed bugs can be difficult, but you can try to inspect both hard and soft furniture (such as the head board, night stand, mattresses and box springs) or around electrical outlets and light switches. Look at the seams, between cushions, in the folds of blankets or curtains, etc. for bugs, eggs, or blood stains/droppings. One option is to run an object with a sharp edge (such as a credit card) past these areas to disturb any bugs that may be present.

If you suspect bed bugs are present in the workplace, report this to your supervisor. If your concerns are not addressed in a timely manner, you can report the concern to your joint health and safety committee or health and safety representative. You may also be able to confirm if you have bed bugs by consulting with your local public health unit or pest control operator.

How do you prevent bed bug infestation?

The best way to prevent bed bugs is regular inspection for the signs of an infestation.

- Be careful when buying used furniture. Inspect each item carefully and wash/clean before use.
- Reduce clutter, as it serves as an ideal habitat for bed bugs whether at home, school, or at work. This housekeeping measure will reduce the number of places for the bed bugs to hide and fewer opportunities for them to travel home with you.
- Keep your belongings stored separately from those of other people. If there is a known problem with bed bugs in the workplace or at school, consider storing your belongings in a separate plastic bin.
- Be vigilant in areas where bed bugs are most likely to be found – including break rooms, storage areas, offices or lounges with upholstered furniture, or areas where people may rest.

- Consider changing into work clothes and shoes when arriving at work and removing them before going home (when there is a risk of infestation).

What are the employer’s responsibilities?

Employers have duties under the occupational health and safety Acts and its applicable Regulations to take every reasonable precaution to protect the health and safety of the worker.

The following precautionary measures can be taken to prevent bed bug infestations and to protect the worker based on a risk assessment conducted of the workplace:

- Develop policies and procedures for reporting bed bug infestations (on-site and off-site workplaces).
- Keep records of infestations, including details of where and when infestations were encountered and the extent of infestations.
- Provide education to all workers regarding bed bugs, including information on bed bug identification, signs of infestation, and prevention awareness.
- Implement integrated pest management activities through a licensed pest management service provider.
- Provide coveralls, shoe covers, or gloves to workers if appropriate. Provide sealable plastic containers to protect workers’ equipment or belongings.

How can bed bugs be removed?

Bed bug infestations are commonly treated by chemical spraying. An integrated pest management system which combines a variety of techniques and products is usually the best option. Information on the safety data sheet should be read and used as directed. To reduce exposure to the chemicals being used for treatment/spraying, it should not occur while employees are in the area. Always follow safe work procedures when working with or near pesticides. See the series of documents about pesticides for more information.

Other physical methods of controlling bedbugs include steam cleaning, vacuuming, heating, freezing, washing, or throwing out items. Steam cleaning should be done before vacuuming, as the steam will flush any bedbugs out of hiding. Heat treatments should be done by professionals.

Whichever treatment is used, it will only be effective if physical control methods and preventative measures are used together.

If you suspect bed bugs have entered your suitcase or clothing, prevention steps include to unpack outdoors, wash clothes using hot water, dry everything in the dryer at the highest temperature for at least 30 minutes, and vacuum your luggage thoroughly.

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