

## Bedbugs putting bite on travelers

Experts say pest becoming global nuisance  
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**COLLEGE STATION** – Bed bugs are well on their way to becoming a worldwide nuisance, especially for international travelers, according to Texas AgriLife Research and Texas AgriLife Extension Service entomologists.

“The more hotels and motels you stay in, the greater the probability of being bitten by bed bugs,” said Dr. Robert Gold, an urban and public health entomologist with AgriLife Research in College Station. “That’s especially true if you travel through Europe or developing countries, but they’re also in the U.S.”

Gold said bed bugs are a growing problem in metropolitan areas that host large numbers of international travelers, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston.

“The first thing anyone traveling should do is inspect their hotel or motel room for bed bugs,” he said. “Bed bugs often leave dried blood or rust-colored stains or tracks, especially on mattress folds and tufts. Pull back the bedding to expose the mattress and box springs and check the mattress, especially the areas closest to the head board and foot of the bed.”

“Bed bugs have really proliferated over the past several years, and there are more and more reports of bed bug infestations in hotels and motels throughout Texas and the rest of the U.S.,” said Noel Troxclair, an AgriLife Extension entomologist in Uvalde.

Troxclair said complaints of bed bugs by travelers staying in accommodations ranging from low-end motels to five-star hotels have increased significantly.

True to their name, bed bugs prefer beds and bedding, but can also be found under cushions, behind picture frames, on lamp stands, behind baseboards, in back of electrical switch plates and in a variety of other locations, Troxclair said.

“Adult bed bugs are the same size as a poppy seed, but flatter,” he said. “Just think about the places a small seed might fit and you’ll get an idea of all the cracks, crevices, nooks and crannies where they can hide.”

If you discover bed bugs or evidence of them upon room inspection, the best solution is to request a different room or, if necessary, to change location, they said.

“Unfortunately for those travelers without time or resources to find different accommodations, there’s no tried-and-true method of preventing bed bugs from biting,” Troxclair said.

However, he added, there might be a few steps travelers can take to protect themselves and reduce the risk of bringing bed bugs home if forced to remain in a bed bug-infested room.

“Having housekeeping vacuum can help remove bed bugs and their eggs from mattresses, box springs, carpets and other areas,” he said. “Have them concentrate on mattress and box springs seams, tufts and edges, as well as where the baseboards and carpet meet.”

“In an emergency, applying an insect repellent like DEET may help the traveler avoid some bed bug bites,” said Dr. Mike Merchant, AgriLife Extension urban entomologist in Dallas. “It’s not for everyone, and I don’t recommend it on a regular basis, but a repellent may help you get through the night in a hotel with bed bugs.”

Probably more important for most travelers is reducing the risk of taking the little bugs home with them, Merchant said.

“Since most bed bugs crawl into cracks and crevices near the bed, it’s a good idea to keep your suitcase and personal articles a few yards away from the bed. After a quick check, I will keep my suitcase on the luggage rack on the opposite side of the room.”

Merchant said this is no guarantee but reduces the chances of a stray bedbug hitching a ride home in a traveler’s clothing or suitcase.

Unlike some other insects, a bed bug’s bite is just about painless, said Merchant, who has allowed captive bed bugs to bite him for research purposes.

“Especially with the smaller ones, you don’t feel a thing. They’re light and very stealthy. They’ll feed and be gone and you won’t even know it.”

Merchant said the welts and itching from a bed bug bite are caused by their saliva, which they inject to prevent blood from clotting as they feed on their “blood meal.” However, unlike other insects, they do transmit disease or inject toxins into their victim.

“The welts may appear a day or two after the bite, so it can be difficult to know exactly when and where a traveler might have been bitten,” Gold noted.

Bed bugs locate their human hosts by body heat and the carbon dioxide exhaled during respiration, but they are also attracted to the human body smell, Troxclair said.

“Taking a bath or shower before going to bed, particularly after a day of physical exertion, may help reduce detection,” he said.

“If you’re exposed to bed bugs, the best you can hope is to slightly reduce the likelihood of being bitten,” Troxclair said. “The only sure way to avoid getting bitten is to get away from them completely.”

## **Educational**

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