

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

BEDBUGS**What are bedbugs?**

Bedbugs are wingless insects that prefer to feed on humans. Their number has increased dramatically since 2000 due to frequent foreign travel and the prohibition of DDT and similar pesticides in 1972. While bedbugs engage in the exchange of blood, there is no evidence that they transmit any diseases.

Bedbugs are nocturnal feeders. They are most commonly found in rooms where people sleep, generally near the bed or other sleeping areas. They have been found in all forms of housing, including college residences, hotels, and hospitals. They are also found in bird and bat dwellings throughout the world but more frequently inhabit tropical and subtropical areas.

What do bedbugs look like?

- Bedbugs are similar in size to a dog tick or apple seed (up to 1/4 inch long).
- They may range in color from a light tan to a dark brown to a burnt orange. They are off-white in color after molting and dark red after feeding.
- Their flat shape helps them hide in crevices. They become swollen after feeding.
- Eggs are white and 1/32 inch long.



Photo courtesy Orkin Co.

How are bedbugs transported?

- Bedbugs are not typically spread by person to person contact.
- They are known as “nature’s hitchhikers” because they are usually transported via personal items, such as clothing, backpacks, bedding, suitcases, boxes, and furniture.
- Bedbugs can quickly spread to other locations (such as your parent’s home, your friend’s apartment, or your significant other’s room) by hitching a ride on your backpack or clothing -- or on the belongings of roommates and friends.
- Bedbugs do not fly and cannot jump.

What are the signs of a bedbug infestation?

Live crawling bugs are the only sign of an active infestation.

- Nighttime is the best time to look for bedbugs because that is when they are most active. Bedbugs are difficult to find during the day because they hide in cracks and crevices, where the females lay their eggs.
- Hiding places include mattresses, box springs, bedframes, window/door frames, furniture drawers, curtains, clothes on the floor, cracks in the floor, and behind electrical outlet covers and picture frames.



ABOVE: Bedbugs like to hide in mattress seams, bedframe crevices, backpack seams, etc.

BELOW: Bedbug excrement. Photos courtesy of Orkin Co.



Other signs of infestation include:

- Small bloodstains on mattresses and sheets.
- Bedbug excrement (usually rust-colored) in the cracks of walls, furniture, and wallpaper.
- Pale yellow exoskeletons left behind from molting.
- A sweet musty odor from the bedbugs’ oil secretions (if the infestation is severe).

When do bedbugs bite?

Bedbugs usually bite exposed areas of skin at night.

- Bedbugs are attracted by your body's warmth and the carbon dioxide that you exhale.
- The bites are painless because the bug injects a numbing substance into the skin.
- Bedbugs usually take about 5-10 minutes to finish a blood meal.

What are the symptoms?

- Bedbug bites may look like solid red bumps or hives, depending on the degree of reaction to the insect's saliva. Some individuals develop a more severe skin reaction that leads to pus-filled blisters. Some people do not react at all.
- Bites are often found in a line or a cluster.
- It is often difficult to tell bedbug bites apart from those of other insects, like mosquitoes or fleas.
- Severe itching may last hours to days.



How are bedbug bites treated?

In most cases, no specific treatment is needed. Bites typically resolve in 2-6 weeks.

Treatment is aimed at controlling itching and discomfort. Common options include:

- Over-the-counter anti-itch lotions and creams containing pramoxine (such as Sarna and Aveeno Anti-Itch).
- Antihistamine medications. Claritin, Zyrtec, and Allegra are non-sedating and long-acting. Benadryl is effective but needs more frequent dosing (about every 6 hours). Benadryl also causes drowsiness, which can be useful for nighttime symptoms.
- Corticosteroid creams applied twice daily as needed for itching. Hydrocortisone 1% is a low-dose cream available over-the-counter. Higher dose options are available with a prescription.

To prevent the bites from getting infected, keep your skin clean and avoid scratching. Consult your healthcare provider if signs of infection develop (such as redness, pain, swelling, pus, and fever).

How do you get rid of bedbugs?

➤ **If you live in VCU Residence Halls:**

- Do not try to eliminate bedbugs yourself!
- **If you think you have a bedbug problem, notify VCU immediately. Contact Residential Life and Housing (828-7666), your Housing Manager, or go to www.housing.vcu.edu to submit a maintenance request.**
- VCU has contracted with an extermination company to professionally treat residence hall rooms and apartments. They will work with students to diagnose a bedbug infestation, schedule the extermination visit, and prepare for the day of extermination.
- Because bedbug infestations can spread rapidly from room to room, VCU Residential Life and Housing maintains an aggressive eradication campaign to quickly respond to concerns and treat living spaces where a bedbug infestation is confirmed.

➤ **If you live in off-campus housing:**

- Promptly contact your landlord to confirm and treat a bedbug infestation. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development has concluded that it is virtually impossible to prove fault with regard to who may have created a bedbug infestation within a rental property. Under Virginia law, the landlord is responsible for correcting the situation and covering the costs.
- If your off-campus landlord refuses to accept responsibility for bedbug extermination or its costs, contact the **Off Campus Student Services Office** for further assistance. Call (804) 828-4514, email offcampus@vcu.edu, or visit <https://offcampus.vcu.edu> to schedule a phone or face-to-face appointment.

➤ **Additional Treatment Considerations**

Some of these measures may not be necessary if professional exterminators are treating the infestation.

- Scrub your mattress and upholstered furniture with a stiff brush to remove bugs and eggs from crevices.
- Thoroughly vacuum your entire living area. Remove the vacuum bag, seal it in a plastic bag, and dispose of it immediately.
- After scrubbing and vacuuming your mattress, put it in a plastic cover that zips. Do not remove the cover for 12 months as bedbugs can live for up to a year between feedings!
- Wash clothes and linens in hot water, and dry them on the highest setting.
- Wrap and seal items like suitcases in large trash bags and leave them in the sun for 2-3 days; the heat will kill the bedbugs and their eggs.
- Repeat a thorough cleaning 1-2 weeks after an infestation to remove any bugs that may have hatched later.

How can I prevent bedbug infestations?

➤ **Home Environment**

- Wash bed linens in hot water once a week.
- Vacuum around the home at least once a week.
- Reduce clutter to limit hiding places for bedbugs.
- Caulk holes in floors and walls. Remove peeling wallpaper.
- Inspect your bed periodically for bedbugs. Check in seams, behind the headboard, and between bedposts and slats.
- Inspect your book bag periodically. Check seams and pouches. Avoid placing your book bag on or under your bed.
- Inspect secondhand furniture prior to bringing it into your home.
- Get rid of any bird and bat habitats near your house or apartment.

➤ **Pets**

- Check household dogs and cats for bedbugs. Bedbugs will feed on any mammal.

➤ **Travel**

- While traveling, thoroughly inspect any room in which you are staying, including the space behind wall hangings.
- Avoiding placing your luggage on or under the bed; use a luggage rack when possible.
- After returning from travel, wash all clothing in hot water and inspect your luggage for signs of bedbugs. Scrub and vacuum suitcases. Another option is to seal suitcases in a plastic bag, and leave them in the sun for 2-3 days to kill bugs and eggs. An alternative to this method is to simply leave your luggage in the trunk of the car “to bake” in the heat for 2-3 days.

Recommended websites:

- www.mayoclinic.org
- www.cdc.gov/parasites/bedbugs
- identify.us.com