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Written for a pest control firm.

How to Avoid Bringing Bed Bugs Home from Work

When bed bugs started creeping back into America, stowaways in the luggage of international travelers, hotels took the first hit. Soon bed bugs started cropping up in houses and apartments, hitchhiking their way in on the clothing and in the suitcases of business travelers and vacationers. Until this summer, however, bed bugs were rarely heard of in U.S. retail stores or commercial office buildings.

More recently, bed bugs began leaving the comfortable sanctuary of American bedrooms and showing up at schools, libraries, hospitals and other high traffic areas. This summer, the first reports of bed bugs in retail stores and a slew of workplace infestations caused panicked Americans to see bed bugs lurking around every corner. It was like turning the clock back to our great-grandparents' day when bed bugs were an everyday fact of life.

Bed bugs typically inhabit bedrooms, preferring to hide close to their preferred food source – the blood of sleeping humans. Entomologists say the increasing incidence of bed bugs in the workplace, far from their normal feeding environment, indicates the exponential growth of these blood-sucking parasites. In a July 2010 survey of pest control firms conducted by the National Pest Management Association (NPMA) and the University of Kentucky, 95% of the pest control professionals surveyed had encountered bed bugs, and 1 in 5 (20%) reported treating infestations in commercial buildings. In 2007 commercial infestations accounted for less than 1% of U.S. bed bug infestations. Today, 40% of bed bug exterminations are performed in commercial settings.

University of Kentucky entomologist and national bed bug expert Michael Potter has called bed bugs the most serious insect threat of the 21st century and the most difficult to control. Slightly smaller than an apple seed, these nocturnal, blood-sucking parasites are adept at hiding in minute crevices, easily transported to new locations and able to survive for a year without feeding. Incredibly prolific, a single pair of bed bugs can produce 300 offspring and 1,000 eggs in three months. Hatching in about a week, larvae begin reproducing within a month. In just a few months, a single pair of bed bugs can spawn an infestation numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

Not attracted by dirt or filth, bed bugs target human blood, on which they must feed before molting or reproducing. Adept hitchhikers, these blood-sucking parasites are spread by their victims, riding into office buildings with co-workers, visitors, vendors, maintenance staff and deliverymen - An equal opportunity pest, in the past year bed bug infestations have been found in former President Bill Clinton's Harlem office, the Sirius XM Radio studio of shock jock Howard Stern, U.N. headquarters, the Ronald Reagan building in Washington D.C., IRS offices in Philadelphia and Kentucky, two Abercrombie & Fitch Hollister stores, Victoria's Secret, the Metropolitan Opera House, Lincoln Center, AMC Times Square movie theater, the Empire State Building, and the corporate offices of Time Warner, Google, CNN, The Wall Street Journal and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services offices in Rockville, Maryland, to name a few.

When bed bugs invade an office, employees often panic, pointing fingers at each other and ostracizing coworkers believed to have introduced the pests. However, bed bugs are so prevalent that more than one worker may have brought them into the workplace or they may have migrated from another office in the building through vents, wall voids or electrical conduits. Barely 1/4 inch long and paper thin when not feeding, bed bugs can slip between the teeth of a backpack zipper; crawl into briefcases and purses, or ride into an office hidden in the seams of clothing or coats. A traveling coworker may carry bed bugs into the office inside his suitcase. Attracted to heat, bed bugs have even been found hiding inside the battery compartments of laptop computers, iPhones and iPods. Your home doesn't have to be infested for you to pick up bed bugs. You can get them on a subway, bus or taxi. You can bring them home from a movie theater or library. If you brush against someone who is carrying bed bugs or sit in a seat recently vacated by

a bed bug victim, there's an excellent chance some of these pests will jump ship and go to work or home with you.

Employers must be proactive in dealing with bed bugs. Business owners should develop a comprehensive bed bug action plan to ensure that they and their employees are prepared should bed bugs come calling. An employer's action plan should:

1. Educate employees so they can recognize bed bugs, signs of infestation and bite symptoms and encourage vigilance.
2. Update employee handbooks and set forth bed bug avoidance techniques and reporting procedures.
3. Emphasize the importance of early detection. Encourage employees to immediately advise management of bed bug activity in the workplace or at home.
4. Be open and sympathetic in communications with employees.
5. Should an employee carry bed bugs home, offer support. Consider defraying the cost of home inspection and treatment for employees, allow employees to use vacation days and the Family and Medical Leave Act to cope with home infestations.
6. Arrange immediate treatment with a licensed pest control professional.
7. Launch a containment plan to prevent cross-contamination between work and home.

If your office is invaded by bed bugs, employees can also take proactive steps to prevent bed bugs from hitchhiking home with them:

1. Educate yourself and your family so you know what bed bugs and their bites look like, where to look for them and signs of infestations.
2. Adopt a minimalist lifestyle. Get rid of clutter where bed bugs can hide. Keep everything off the floor.
3. Inspect your office chair and desk for signs of bed bugs daily. Choose metal over wood office furniture.
4. Leave briefcases and laptops at work. Use a hard-sized, not fabric, briefcase. Minimize the number of items you carry between work and home and transport them in sealed plastic bags.
5. Zip work items into a bed bug-proof luggage liner to minimize cross-contamination.
6. When you arrive home after work, leave your shoes in the garage. Inspect each item carefully before taking it into your home.
7. Change clothes as soon as you get home. Place work clothes in sealed plastic bags until they can be laundered.
8. At home, cover mattresses and box springs with bed bug-proof mattress encasements to prevent bed bugs from infesting your bedding.
9. If your office is the site of an active infestation, regularly inspect sheets and mattresses for bed bug signs.
10. If you suspect a bed bug infestation at home, immediately call a licensed pest control professional and arrange treatment. Look for an established pest control firm that has been in business for many years, is a member of the National Pest Management Association (NPMA), has a good Better Business Bureau rating and offers a 90-day guarantee.