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Written for a pest control firm.

Travelers' Guide to Avoiding Bed Bugs

A tiny insect the size of an apple seed is turning vacations into nightmares and giving U.S. travelers the willies every time they enter a hotel room. Cimex lectularius, the common bed bug, returned to American shores in the suitcases of international travelers. Over the past decade this blood-sucking parasite has been hitchhiking its way across the U.S. hidden in the luggage of millions of unsuspecting travelers. Spreading from New York City, the nation's busiest international gateway, bed bugs have crept relentlessly across American to infest all 50 states.

Over the past few years, bed bug infestations in the U.S. have increased by 500%. Researchers cite travel as the No. 1 cause of bed bug spread and infestation. The New York City Department of Information Technology & Telecommunications recently reported a 50% increase in bed bug complaints at hotels between 2009 and 2010. In heavily infested cities in Ohio, more than 70% of hotels have battled bed bug infestations. According to the NPMA 2010 Comprehensive Global Bed Bug Study conducted in conjunction with the University of Kentucky, 67% of 1,000 pest management firms surveyed reported treating bed bug infestations at a hotel or motel in the past 12 months.

Bed bugs feed on human blood and are not attracted by dirt or filth. "Bed bugs are brought into hotels by guests; it is not a hotel sanitation issue," the American Hotel and Lodging Association said in a statement. These insects are as likely to be found in a 5-star luxury hotel as a modest 1-star motel. And there's the rub for travelers. A hotel room that is bed bug free one night can be infested the next. Bed bugs do not live on humans. They crawl into beds to feed, then scurry away, hiding in crevices near beds until the next meal. Suitcases and laptop computers placed on the bed make perfect hiding places for these pests. When travelers check out of an infested hotel room, a few bed bugs are likely to stow away in their luggage, creeping out at the next hotel to infest another room or, even worse, following travelers home.

The growing prevalence of bed bugs in the U.S. is no reason to swear off travel and stay home; but travelers who don't want to bring bed bugs home with them will want to be proactive before, during and after a trip. Use this handy guide to protect yourself from bed bugs when you travel.

Before you book a hotel room

- Check [Bed Bug Registry](#) and [Trip Advisor](#) online to see if bed bugs have been reported at your preferred hotel. If you find multiple reports, choose a different hotel. A new iPhone app, Bed Bug Alert by Apps Genius in New York City, also reports bed bug outbreaks in 10 major U.S. cities.
- Call the hotel and ask how often rooms are inspected for bed bugs and whether bed bug-proof encasements are installed on the beds.

Before you leave home

- Install bed bug-proof encasements and box springs on all the beds in your home.
- Educate yourself about bed bugs so you know what to watch for. Bed bugs are small, flat, wingless insects that feed on human blood. From cream-colored nymphs the size of a poppy-seed, bed bugs progress through 5 larval stages to become reddish brown, 1/4-inch long adults. When they feed, bed bugs leave bloody smears and black fecal dots that look like coffee grounds on bed sheets and mattresses. About 50% of people react to their bites and will exhibit itchy, red, mosquito-like bites, usually in rows or groups of three. Whitish skins shed during molting are another indication of bed bug infestation.
- Download and print the free New York State Integrated Pest Management [Bed Bug Travelers' Card](#) prepared by Cornell University. This wallet-size card contains bed bug photos and information, making it a handy guide for travelers (and college students).

When you pack

- Pack a small flashlight, disposable gloves and a selection of garbage bags where they will be easily-accessible.
- Choose hard-sided luggage. Bed bugs like to hide in the seams of soft-sided luggage and prefer to lay their eggs on rough surfaces.
- You may want to spray your luggage inside and out with a permethrin-based luggage spray. Child and pet safe when dry, permethrin provides 4 to 6 weeks of protection against bed bugs. Do not use a house or garden sprays as they have no effect on bed bugs.
- Only pack clothing that can safely be washed in hot water and dried in a hot dryer for a minimum of 30 minutes.
- Before placing into suitcase, pack clothing and other items into bed bug-proof luggage liners or sealable plastic bags like Ziplock bags. Do not use bags with slider openings as bed bugs can squeeze past sliders to infest bag contents.

When you arrive at your hotel

- Ask to inspect the room before you hand over your credit card.
- Inspect the room following the instructions below.
- If you find evidence of bed bugs, ask for another room in a different part of the hotel or move to another hotel. Do not accept a room that is next to, above or below the infested room as these are the first places bed bugs will migrate as an infestation spreads.
- Repeat the inspection procedure in your new room.

How to inspect a hotel room

- Put your luggage and possessions in the bathtub where bed bugs are least likely to harbor. Bed bugs cannot climb smooth surfaces and prefer to stay near their food source (sleeping humans).
- Put on your disposable gloves and get out your flashlight.
- Start at the bed as 80% of bed bug infestations are found in mattresses and box springs.
- Pull the headboard away from the wall. Bed bugs often harbor in this inaccessible space. If the headboard is attached to the wall with brackets, lift it up and away from the wall (ask a hotel employee for help). Use your flashlight to look for crawling bugs or fecal stains.
- Remove linens and pillows from the beds, inspecting them for bloody smears and black fecal stains.
- Inspect the mattress and box springs, especially seams and piping, for live bugs, shed skins, blood smears and fecal stains.
- Using your flashlight, check the rest of the room, including behind hanging pictures, inside and under drawers (pull drawers all the way out), upholstered furniture, around air vents and along carpet edges.

During your hotel stay

- Keep luggage on luggage racks positioned at least 4 inches from the wall or on hard furniture like a table. If you must place luggage on the floor, place it in resealable plastic bags first. Never lay suitcases or clothing on beds or upholstered furniture.
- Keep suitcases closed when not in use to keep bed bugs from crawling inside.
- Do not unpack your clothing into drawers; keep it inside your suitcase.
- Hang clothing, purses and backpacks in the bathroom or from hangers in the closet.
- Seal purchases in plastic bags.
- Place dirty clothes in disposable bed bug-proof laundry bag or sealed plastic bags.
- Keep shoes in sealed plastic bags.
- Inspect sheets and mattresses for bed bug signs every morning. Request a different room if you wake up with itchy bites or see signs of bed bugs. Some upscale hotels will launder clothing and steam-clean your luggage if bed bugs are found in your room.

When you check out

- Check each item as you pack it, as well as luggage surfaces.
- Seal suitcases in large plastic bags before putting them in your car.

When you return home

- Do not carry suitcases into your house. Unpack on a cleared floor in the garage or laundry room. If you must carry your suitcases through the house to reach the laundry room, seal them in large plastic bags to prevent bed bugs or eggs from falling off and infesting your home. Never unpack on a carpet.
- Unpack suitcase contents directly into plastic trash bags, carefully inspecting each item as you unpack it.
- Sort laundry into trash bags, one load per bag. Even unworn clothing should be laundered.
- Carry clothes directly to washer and launder in hottest water possible (minimum 120 degrees) and dry at hottest setting for 60 minutes. Remove used bags from home immediately.
- Clothing that cannot be washed should be taken to the dry cleaners in a sealed plastic bag. Alert the cleaners that bed bugs may be present.
- Items that cannot be laundered should be frozen in sealed plastic bags for 2 weeks.
- Carefully inspect suitcases with a flashlight, brushing surfaces with a stiff-bristled brush to dislodge any eggs. Vacuum thoroughly and immediately dispose of vacuum bag. Store suitcases in sealed plastic bags in the garage. Never store suitcases in or near bedrooms.
- Vacuum entire house and promptly dispose of sweeper bag.
- For the next few weeks, inspect beds daily for bed bug signs.

What to do if bed bugs follow you home

If, despite all your precautions, you discover evidence of bed bugs in your home after traveling, immediately contact a licensed pest control company with an expertise in bed bug extermination. Bed bugs are extremely prolific insects. During its 6- to 12-month lifespan, a female bed bug can lay 500 eggs with offspring capable of reproducing within a month. Prompt treatment by a pest management professional in the early stages of infestation can save you money and prevent bed bugs from spreading through your home.