

AWAY GAME

How to Avoid Bedbugs on Vacation

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Bedbugs are gifted hitchhikers. They don't hop or fly but they sure can crawl, especially when motivated by the promise of a good hiding place, such as your checked baggage. While your bag is in the plane's cargo hold bedbugs "may have hitchhiked on someone else's luggage on the plane and transferred to yours," suggests Brian DiCicco, CEO of Pest Management Inc.

Bedbugs love upholstery, too, so they might also be lingering in the taxi or rental car you used to reach your hotel. Ah, yes, your hotel. Lest you think bedbugs only linger in fleabags – with all due respect to fleas – the [National Pest Management Association](#) (NPMA) points out that a "bedbug infestation is not a sign of unclean or unsanitary conditions. Bedbugs don't discriminate and have been found in world class hotels and budget properties alike."

But after all this effort to stow away and hide out, what is it that bedbugs really want? You. "Bedbugs use exhaled carbon dioxide and body heat to locate a potential blood meal," says Mike Deutsch, an entomologist with the Arrow Exterminating Company, adding that "when hungry, bedbugs will [travel](#) 30-40 feet to and from their hiding places and their sleeping hosts when seeking a meal." The critters may already be waiting in their favorite places – the headboard, mattress and box spring, or the bedding itself – but bedbugs also may be hiding "anywhere in a room," suggests Deutsch. "We have found bedbugs inside laptop computers, [cell phones](#), clock radios, TVs, and other electronic devices. We have also found [them] in book bindings and even inside newspapers that are delivered to your room."

If they don't join you in your destination, bedbugs also have the potential to hook up with you on the plane or cab ride home, of course. So what's a traveler to do? There are several steps you can take to protect yourself and bite bedbugs before they bite you.

Know what you're looking for

Bedbugs resemble other small insects, so if you're trying to spot bedbugs or signs of them while inspecting your hotel room upon check-in, know that the bug looks "similar to a tick," says Ashley M. Marratt, CEO of informational Web site The Bed Bug Answer. Further, "a bedbug "is a small rusty-red or mahogany colored, oval-shaped insect," says entomologist Lynn Frank, technical director of the Suburban Exterminating Company and "signs of bedbugs can include adult insects, slightly smaller and lighter colored 'nymphs' which are young bed bugs that have not fed yet, and bed bug eggs which look like small grains of rice," says entomologist S. John Barcay, a senior scientist at Ecolab, which has treated more than half a million hotel rooms for bedbugs since 2003.

Adds Barcay, "other signs of bedbugs on the mattress are small drops of blood in a row or black spots that look like mold -- this is actually digested blood from their previous meals." To put a finer point on it, the spots are "bloody fecal matter," Maratt says, "smaller than the size of poppy seeds." The black spot will "stick to the surface. If it falls off, then it's not a bed bug spot. Take a wet towel and wipe the spot to see if it smears and if so, then it may be fecal matter." DiCicco notes that maturing bedbugs "can sometimes leave behind exoskeleton pieces as well, which are translucent" that Marratt says are "the color of a popcorn kernel shell."

Protect yourself in your hotel room

Even if your check-in inspection doesn't turn up signs of bedbugs, you should still go into bedbug avoidance mode. Keep your suitcases and clothes off the bed and carpeting at all times, all sources urged. Place your bag on a luggage rack if one is provided and you might even take it a step further by moving the rack into the bathroom, as "bed bugs do not like tile or metal and are rarely found in these areas unless the infestation is extreme" says Mike Canizales, co-founder of Sniff K9's.

If your room didn't come equipped with a luggage rack and you choose not to share a [bathroom](#) with your luggage, avoid unpacking as much as possible and put your used clothing " in a plastic bag before packing back into your suitcase," suggests Michael Colongione, president and owner of GotchA! Bedbug Inspectors. "Take the items from the plastic bag directly to the washer when you return [home](#)." Likewise, if you do any shopping on vacation, he says, bag your purchases and wash any new clothing once you're home. Machine wash hot and, several sources suggest, use an extra hot and long dryer cycle for any garments you bring home from the trip -- bedbugs won't survive heat above 113 degrees Fahrenheit, DiCicco says.

If you find bedbugs

Should you find bedbugs or signs of them in your hotel room upon check-in, notify management

and ask to switch to a different room “with no history of bed bugs and that is not adjacent to, above, or below the infested room,” advises travel risk management firm iJET Intelligent Risk Systems, “noting that a “bedbug infestation can be a limited, low-level problem -- for example, an infestation in just a single room -- and may not be enough to warrant changing hotels entirely.” However, if you discover bedbugs after you’ve already settled in or spent the night, DiCicco suggests you’re within your rights to ask management to “have your clothing dry cleaned and luggage steam cleaned,” he says, and then “inspect the next room before even starting to get settled.”

If you or any of your [traveling](#) companions think you’ve been bitten by a bedbug or have seen bedbug evidence in your room, “make a log of where and when you were bitten, together with photographs” says attorney Elena Rivkin Franz,” at which point you could of course ask for a different room or ask management “to pay for new lodging elsewhere,” Franz says.

If you get bit

Deutsch says that while the actual bite of a bedbug is painless, “most people report an intense itching at the site. Some people will have a reaction similar to a mosquito bite that will last a few days. Other people will have violent reactions resulting in large areas of raised and swollen skin at the site of the bite.” He adds that “since bedbugs have not been shown to transmit any diseases, the primary potential problem with a bedbug bite is a secondary infection caused by constant scratching.” Before using any ointments or meds for your itching, consult your doctor.

Prepare your bags for the trip home

Colongione says you can help dissuade bedbugs from coming home with you by spraying your “suitcase, hotel [bed](#), or rental car with an EPA approved over-the-counter spray” that “kills the bedbugs and their eggs, which the human eye cannot see.” If you’re driving home, upon leaving your hotel, “immediately seal any luggage in large plastic bags -- such as lawn or leaf bags -- prior to loading your car,” iJET advises, and once you get home, DiCicco says, don’t bring your bags directly inside – while outside your house or apartment zap your luggage again with any spray product you bought or wipe your bags down with alcohol. You should also “inspect and vacuum your suitcases thoroughly before bringing them into the house, the NPMA says, and further, says iJET, “luggage can be sterilized using the steam function on many [household](#) irons.”

The one thing about bedbugs you absolutely did not want to know

If you are scouting for bedbugs at any point during your trip, you can rely on more than your eyesight to gather evidence. “Other signs of bedbugs may include a foul smell,” Marratt says “The odor has been described a number of ways. Most say it resembles spoiled raw beef, a musty odor, or a sweet [odor](#). After all, it is old blood you smell.”

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