

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Division of Consumer & Business Education

Good Night, Sleep Tight, and Don't Let the Bed Bugs Bite... Your Wallet

The resurgence of bed bugs has caused more than the creepy little blood suckers to come out of the woodwork. Some self-proclaimed pest control professionals and marketers are trying to take a bite out of your wallet by peddling products that claim to prevent or remedy bed bug infestations. In fact, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) – one of the federal agencies responsible for managing the bed bug problem – reports an increase in the number of individuals and companies making unrealistic claims about their abilities to control or eradicate the pests.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation's consumer protection agency, urges you to be cautious when shopping for products and services related to bed bug infestations to avoid being sucked dry financially – and possibly making the problem worse.

Bed Bug Basics

Bed bugs are good hitchhikers, riding into homes in and on luggage, furniture, bedding, or clothing. Once inside, the pests like to hide in small cracks and crevices – behind your bed's headboard, in the seams and tufts of your mattress and inside the box spring, along baseboard cracks, and behind wallpaper. The presence of bed bugs has little to do with cleanliness, although clutter can provide good hiding places and make them difficult to treat.

Bed bugs do not transmit diseases, but their bites can become red, itchy welts. Bed bugs typically feed on blood every five to 10 days, but can live for a year or more without eating. They also can withstand a wide range of temperatures from nearly freezing to almost 113 °F.

The Tell Tale Signs of Bed Bugs

Adult bed bugs are oval, wingless and have a rusty red color. They have flat bodies, antennae and small eyes. For photos, see www.epa.gov/bedbugs. They are visible to the naked eye, but often hide in cracks and crevices. So when you clean, change bedding, or travel, look for other signs that they may present, like:

- dark spots about this size: • on furniture, including mattresses and boxsprings. They are bed bug feces and may bleed on fabric like a felt-tip marker.
- rusty or reddish stains on bed sheets or mattresses caused by bed bugs being crushed.
- bed bug eggs and eggshells, which are tiny (about 1mm) and white.
- live bed bugs, though there are many other bugs that may look a lot like bed bugs. It's important to get an expert's identification.

Treating Bed Bug Infestations

Experts agree: Bed bug infestations are difficult to control, and no one treatment or technique has been found to be effective in all cases. Still, bed bugs can be controlled through a combination of techniques known as integrated pest management (IPM) – an environmentally sensitive approach that includes prevention, monitoring, and limited use of chemical pesticides. In fact, some populations of bed bugs have developed resistance to common pesticides, making some sprays ineffective. Alternative treatments include heat and steam. Bedding, clothing, and electronic items shouldn't ever be treated with pesticides, but can be treated with heat.

Do-It-Yourself

If you try to control bed bugs on your own with pesticides, choose products that are intended for that purpose. The EPA has a bed bug product search tool at <http://cfpub.epa.gov/oppref/bedbug/> that can help you choose a product that meets your needs.

Before you use a pesticide, read the label. Never use a pesticide indoors that is intended for outdoor use. Using the wrong pesticide or using it incorrectly can make you, your family, and your pets sick. It also can make your home unsafe to live in. Never spray pesticides on top of mattresses, sofas, and other upholstered furniture, or in areas where there are children or pets.

What about using bug bombs or foggers? Many bed bugs are resistant to the pesticides used in these products. In addition, these products do not reach cracks and crevices where bed bugs reside. So, while experts agree that bug bombs and foggers can kill bed bugs, they definitely shouldn't be the only control method you use.

Hiring a Professional

If you'd rather hire an expert do the job:

- Make sure that you really have bed bugs and not some other pests.
- Use a professional with experience in bed bug control. Controlling bed bugs is different than controlling other pests.
- Be wary of exterminators who show up uninvited and offer a free inspection. They may use scare tactics to pressure you into authorizing immediate and costly treatments.
- Deal with a qualified and licensed pest management company. Call your state pest control regulatory agency for information about the status of pest management companies. In most states, the regulatory agency is the State Department of Agriculture. You also can check out companies with your state Attorney General, local consumer protection agency, and Better Business Bureau or an internet search engine.
- Ask friends and neighbors to recommend pest control companies they have used successfully for bed bugs and how satisfied they were with the service. You can do this online through a community bulletin board or neighborhood listserv.
- Get bids from several companies. Ask about their training, and their approach to controlling bed bugs.
- Be wary of choosing a company based on price alone. Quality control is the most important factor.
- Before you sign a contract, get details on the extent of the infestation, the proposed work plan, and the number of visits required and anticipated to solve the problem. A reputable company will inspect your property before quoting you a price or beginning any pesticide application.

The company also should give you a written inspection report, and a plan for preparing for treatment and preventing further infestation.

- Find out if the pest control company has liability insurance to cover any damage that occurs to your home or furnishings during treatment.
- If you get a written “guarantee,” look for what it covers, how long it lasts, what you must do to keep it in force, and what is required for continuing control, prevention, and management.
- Read the EPA’s Citizen’s Guide to Pest Control and Pesticide Safety, which offers more tips on how to choose a pest control company.

Preventing Bed Bug Infestations

The best way to control bed bugs is to prevent them from entering your home. Here’s how:

- Inspect secondhand furniture, beds, and couches for signs of bed bug infestation before bringing them home.
- Enclose mattresses and box springs in covers labeled “allergen rated,” “for dust mites,” or “for bed bugs.” Periodically check for rips or openings and tape these up.
- Reduce clutter in your home to reduce hiding places for bed bugs.
- Repair cracks in plaster, repair or remove any loose wallpaper, and tighten light switch covers.
- Apply caulk to seal crevices and joints in baseboards and gaps on shelves or cabinets.

When traveling:

- Use luggage racks to hold your suitcases when packing and unpacking rather than setting your luggage on the bed or floor.
- Check the mattress and headboard before getting into bed.
- When you get home, unpack directly into a washing machine. Wash all items showing bed bug stains, and dry on the highest setting for at least 20 minutes. The heat from the dryer kills the bugs.
- Inspect and then vacuum luggage. Empty the vacuum or seal and dispose of its bag outside of your home after each use.

For More Information

Contact the following agencies and organizations to learn how to control household pests.

- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) – www.epa.gov/bedbugs
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Topics/bedbugs.htm
- National Pesticide Information Center – <http://npic.orst.edu/pest.htm>

The FTC works to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint or get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. Watch a video, *How to File a Complaint*, at ftc.gov/video to learn more. The FTC enters consumer complaints into the Consumer Sentinel Network, a secure online database and investigative tool used by hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.