



There may be more to the whole 'Good night, sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite' bedtime rhyme than you think. Bed bugs are real insects and populations are on the rise. Find out what these insects look like and how can you prevent their dreaded bite.

Adult bed bugs are bigger than you imagine. They may start out small, but adult bed bugs are between 3/8 to 1/4 of an inch long and are reddish-brown in color and look similar to a flattened tick. The immatures look exactly like the adults, just a much smaller version. When they first emerge from the white eggs, the young are about the size of a pin head and have more of a light tan appearance until they feed. Proper identification of the pest is key. There are several insects that look like bed bugs except for minor differences. To tell the difference between a bed bug and a bat bug, for example, you would need to compare the length of the hair surrounding the head of the insect to the size of its eyeball, not an easy task for the untrained eye.

The food source and feeding habits of the bed bug are what makes most people squirm. Bed bugs feed on blood. They would prefer human blood, but they can feed on Fluffy, Polly, or Fido depending on who is nearby. During the day, bed bugs hide in tight places near beds or where people sleep at night. At night they come out to feed. The bed bugs locate the food source through increased levels of carbon dioxide and by sensing body heat. They normally feed on areas that aren't covered by clothing, usually around the head, neck, arms, and shoulders or even the legs and ankles.

Determining a bed bug infestation from bite marks isn't the most reliable method. Recent research has proven that bed bugs feed in random patterns, instead of several times in a line like what was once thought. To make it more difficult, not everyone reacts the same way to bed bug bites. Some people have severe reactions to the bites, while others can have no reaction at all. Determining if you have bed bugs based upon bite marks alone is not the best method. Identification of the insect is needed to confirm a bed bug infestation.

Bed bugs use a variety of methods to infest. These insects are excellent hitch hikers. They can crawl into luggage in hotels or come with overnight guests, hang onto clothing or hide in personal items like purses and diaper bags. In apartments or higher density housing situations they can move and infest neighboring rooms or apartments or sit and wait for new tenants to move in. They can also be moved in used or garage sale items like couches, vacuums, or mattresses.

Bed bugs thrive in tight quarters. They live in tight places, gaps, or cracks around the bed or where people sleep. They can be found in recliners, couches, chairs, anywhere people sleep. In a bed, they are often found around the binding of the mattress or box spring or in tight corners of the headboard. Most bed bugs are found in the bed or within 15 feet of the bed. If you try to sleep on the couch to avoid becoming a meal of a bed bug, you might be spreading the infestation. Bed bugs can crawl as much as 20 feet away in a night looking for their next meal.

Prevention is the best way to keep from picking up these hitch hikers. When traveling, inspect the hotel room for bed bugs as soon as you enter the room. Look behind the headboard, the mattress and box spring and other locations near the bed. Place your luggage on the metal stand or store in the bathroom, which is usually the farthest away from the bed and has flooring that makes it easy to spot bed bugs. Zip up your luggage to keep large adults from crawling inside. Inspect used items when purchasing or renting. If possible, wash in hot water and dry the item on the hottest setting for at least 30 minutes. Out-of-town guests stay with you over the holidays? Start the inspection process early. It is easier to take care of a few bed bugs than a large infestation.

With a little know how and a lot prevention, there are steps you can do to keep the bed bugs out of your bed. Sleep tight.

Elizabeth Exstrom is the Horticulture Extension Educator with Nebraska Extension in Hall County. For more information contact Elizabeth at elizabeth.exstrom@unl.edu, her blog at <http://huskerhort.com/>, or HuskerHort on Facebook and Twitter.