

Blood-sucking parasites

1. You've probably heard the saying, 'Goodnight, sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite!' But have you ever wondered what bedbugs are?
2. Bedbugs are wingless insects that infest houses, and beds in particular, all over the world.
3. These oval-shaped insects are only about 5 mm long when fully grown. Usually light brown in colour, they change to reddish-brown after they eat. Bedbugs are small, flat insects and fast runners, so they can hide easily and are hard to detect. Bedbugs have large mouth parts called 'mandibles' which are adapted for piercing skin and sucking blood.
4. These nocturnal parasites feed mostly on the blood of humans, but will also feed on rodents, rabbits and bats. They are attracted to body heat and can detect carbon dioxide expelled in human breath to find a source of food. When bedbugs bite into human skin, they inject saliva which can cause an allergic reaction in some people. The painless bite can become itchy and swell to form a round, red mark. Bedbugs feed for about five to ten minutes and then go away to digest their meal.
5. Bedbugs like to live close to food sources so they are usually found in mattresses and bedding, under or between floorboards, under loose wallpaper and carpets, in cracks and crevices of walls, and in bed frames and furniture. They can also be found in luggage and clothing and are commonly found in hotel and motel rooms.
6. Bedbugs begin their lives as cream-coloured eggs about 1.5 mm long. A nymph emerges from the egg, changes four more times and then becomes a mature adult. At each stage, the nymph eats at least one blood meal before molting to be ready for the next stage. At each stage from egg to adult, a bedbug increases in size by about 0.5 mm. The completion of the six nymph stages takes about six to eight weeks. An adult bedbug lays between two and five eggs every day, then cements them to rough surfaces to hide them until they hatch in about ten days. An adult bedbug lives for between six and twelve months.
7. How do you know if you have bedbugs in your house and how can you get rid of them? Bites on family members are one sign. Another is eggs or bugs in the bedding. Sometimes small bloodstains may indicate crushed bugs. And the best treatment? Good hygiene, good housekeeping and a pest exterminator!

