BED BUGS

What do they look like?

The adult bedbug is a flat, oval shaped insect approximately 5 mm long, reddish-brown in colour becoming purple after feeding. They are nocturnal insects which feed at night.

Bedbugs are unable to fly, they either crawl or are passively transported in clothing, luggage, furniture, books or other objects used as harbourage. They are able to survive many months without feeding which increases their chances of surviving long periods of transportation or storage.

How do you spot them?

Any household can become infested with bedbugs. Though often associated with premises with low standards of hygiene, increased travel abroad has opened to doors of any house.

Infestations of bedbugs found in domestic premises usually occur in the bedrooms. Both adult and juveniles live together hiding in cracks and crevices most of the time. They normally come out at night usually just before dawn to feed on the blood of their sleeping hosts. Bedbugs will normally hide close to where the host sleeps e.g. in the frame of the bed or mattress, in furniture, behind the skirting board or wallpaper or anywhere that provides a dark harbourage during the daylight hours.

In the UK bedbugs reach peak numbers towards early autumn when all stages in their life cycle will be present. Activities decrease with the onset of cold weather, egg laying ceases and the development of the juveniles slow down. Bedbugs overwinter mainly as adults unless in adequately heated premises.

How do they affect me?

A property infested with bedbugs may be classified as being "in a verminous condition" under the Public Health Act 1936. Owners of these premises may be obliged to have them disinfested.

Although bedbugs are not regarded as disease carriers their blood feeding can cause severe irritation in some people, resulting in loss of sleep, lack of energy and listlessness, particularly in children. The bite of a bedbug often gives rise to a hard, whitish swelling which is different from a flea bite which leaves a dark red spot surrounded by a reddened area. People react differently to bites, some gaining immunity.

The excrement of a bedbug gives a characteristic speckled appearance to their harbourages. They also have stink glands which confer a distinctive and unpleasant almond like smell in infected rooms. The thought of being preyed on by bedbugs is normally sufficient to make most people take immediate action for some form of control.

How do they live?

Bedbug eggs are cemented to the surface of the harbourage, often in large numbers. Temperature and the availability of food have a profound effect on egg production and under ideal conditions can be almost continuous, at a rate of about three per day. The eggs hatch to produce a nymph just over 1 mm long and like all nymphal stages appear similar to the adults apart from size and colour. The nymph requires one full blood meal before moulting to the next stage. Development from egg to adult and the duration of adult life varies according to

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temperature and the availability of food. At 18 - 20°C nymphs feed about every ten days and the adults weekly. If necessary both can survive long periods without food. In unheated rooms where the temperature drops below 13°C in the winter, egg laying and feeding stops and the population declines as eggs and young nymphs die.

How do you control them?

In all infestations an attempt should be made to determine the source of the infestation, so that proper control measures can be taken. The inspection would highlight the extent of the infestation since the measures necessary for control would depend on whether the infestation is established and widely distributed throughout the premises, or recently introduced and likely to be more localised.

Control measures would have to be thorough and directed at all the harbourages.

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