

## Frequently Asked Questions About Bed Bugs in the Workplace

In recent years, bed bugs have re-emerged in New York City and elsewhere as a major source of infestations in homes, schools, commercial establishments, and workplaces. While bed bugs do not transmit disease, bed bug bites can cause itching and discomfort, and the presence of bed bugs can be disturbing to everyone in an affected home or work environment.

The following sections address many of the questions raised by agency HR, facilities, safety and health staff, and employees about issues that can arise in connection with the presence of bed bugs in an office setting. For general information about bed bugs and their prevention and remediation, please consult the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) website on this topic ([www.nyc.gov/bedbugs](http://www.nyc.gov/bedbugs)).

### **Prevention**

*What steps can be taken in the workplace to prevent bed bug infestations?*

Bed bugs can be easily transported from the home to the workplace by employees and visitors. Since it would be impossible to screen everyone entering the workplace, the best preventive measures are *education* and *observation*. All employees should be encouraged to visit the DOHMH bed bug website to learn how to identify bed bugs and how to address infestations at home. Employees should be diligent in recognizing signs of bed bugs at home or at work, so that remedial measures can be taken quickly to prevent their spread to other locations. Eliminating clutter in the workplace can also make it much easier to locate any bed bugs that may be present.

*Should employees be permitted to bring in alcohol sprays and baking soda into the office as possible preventive measures?*

Neither alcohol nor baking soda has been demonstrated to be effective in preventing bed bug infestations, and they should not be used for that purpose. Under no circumstances should employees be permitted to use alcohol sprays or any type of pesticide in the office. Only licensed exterminators are permitted to apply pesticides under strictly regulated conditions.

## **Investigating Reports of Bed Bugs**

*What are the first steps to be taken when a report has been made that bed bugs have been found in the workplace?*

The first step in an agency's investigation of a report of bed bugs is to determine, to the extent possible, the nature of, and the scope of the bed bug presence. If the insect(s) in question can be caught, a positive identification should be made, as it is very common for beetles or other types of pests to be mistaken for bed bugs. It is important to be aware that not all bugs are bed bugs: DOHMH provides a service for identification, with guidelines on how to submit samples (see attachment).

If a bed bug has been found, the work location should be carefully inspected for any additional signs. Very often a stray bed bug or two may enter the workplace by any number of means, and immediate assessment and treatment by an exterminator, as necessary, can resolve the problem before it becomes more serious. However, if numerous bed bugs have been found, or if there are repeated occurrences, a more serious condition may exist which warrants further investigation and more extensive remediation. The agency's exterminator may use a variety of means to inspect the workplace, including the use of properly trained bed bug detector dogs.

*How can my agency determine the source of a bed bug in the workplace?*

While agency visitors or clients may sometimes introduce bed bugs into the workplace, very often their presence can be traced to an individual employee, based upon reports and observations from co-workers and/or a physical inspection of the work area. The process of identifying the source of the problem can often be difficult, especially as confidentiality issues may arise during the investigation process.

*How can my agency encourage reporting of bed bug sightings?*

Agencies should distribute a memo to employees advising that:

- Reporting of bed bug sightings is essential to resolving potential problems
- Bed bug sightings should be reported to a designated individual or individuals
- All such reports will remain confidential
- Employees can also provide information, confidentially, about co-workers whom they believe may be bringing bed bugs into the workplace, without fear of retaliation

- If the presence of bed bugs is confirmed, immediate action will be taken to resolve the problem
- Further information can be found on the DOHMH bed bug website; printed materials may also be obtained from DOHMH.

## **Remediation and Interaction with Employees**

*What should be done if bed bugs are confirmed to be in an employee's work area?*

Your agency's extermination service should be called in to inspect and determine the appropriate treatment for the area as soon as possible. The exterminator should inform you if only a few bed bugs were present, if eggs were found, or if there is evidence of a more significant infestation, and will then advise as to the recommended mode of treatment. DCAS Contract Services can be contacted about available pest management requirement contracts for the location.

*How should my agency handle a situation where an employee is bringing bed bugs into the office?*

If, after a careful review, you determine that an employee is bringing bed bugs into the office, especially if there has been a significant infestation or repeated infestations, the best course of action would be for a supervisor, HR, EAP, or union PSU personnel (as appropriate) to discuss the matter confidentially with the employee to learn if the employee is experiencing an infestation in his or her home. The employee should be provided with guidance and information (such as materials found on the DOHMH website, or their printed materials) that can assist the employee in resolving any infestations at his or her home. In all cases, the employee should be advised to carefully check all garments, shoes, handbags, and other belongings for the presence of bed bugs before coming into the workplace.

*Isn't there a stigma attached to having a bed bug problem?*

Bed bugs have been found in every type of building, including luxury hotels and expensive retail stores, and the presence of bed bugs does not correspond to dirty or unkempt living or working conditions. However, as there remains a negative perception of persons who have bed bug problems, it is advisable to treat bed bug issues in a discreet and confidential manner.

*Should an employee determined to be bringing bed bugs into the office be sent home?*

There are very limited circumstances under which an employee can be directed to leave the workplace. The best course of action to take with respect to an employee who is known to be bringing bed bugs into the office is to review information on bed bug prevention and remediation with the employee and to strongly encourage the employee to resolve the infestation at their home. HR and other agency personnel, DOHMH, and Citywide EAP can assist the employee further in locating qualified exterminating services and, if the employee is a tenant, in raising the issue with the employee's landlord. It should be impressed upon the employee that addressing bed bug problems at home and preventing them from affecting the workplace benefits not only the employee but his or her co-workers, as well.

*Should an employee be given leave in order to resolve a bed bug infestation at home?*

An employee who needs time to resolve a bed bug problem at home should use his or her accrued leave. Pursuant to time and leave regulations, leave can be advanced at the discretion of the individual agency. In some situations, an agency may wish to ask the employee to agree to submit proof that arrangements have been made for extermination services before advancing leave to the employee. If the employee continues to report to his or her work location pending the resolution of the home infestation, the employee should be advised that he/she must thoroughly screen all garments, shoes, bags, and other personal property before entering the workplace.

*Would it be appropriate to discipline an employee who is responsible for a persistent bed bug infestation in the office?*

In the rare event that an employee resists all efforts at resolution, an agency may wish to consider counseling or disciplining an employee, in accordance with contractual due process procedures, who has failed to maintain his or her work area in a "clean, safe, and sanitary condition" as per the agency's Code of Conduct. However, there can be other underlying issues that may not be obvious, and it is always preferable for agencies to take all reasonable steps to work with the employee in question to help him or her resolve their bed bug issues.

*What steps should be taken with respect to employees who work in the vicinity of an employee who is responsible for a bed bug infestation?*

Employees at workstations where bed bugs have been found should be temporarily relocated pending the treatment and remediation of the effected area. Extra care should be taken to ensure that these employees are not themselves transporting bed bugs to the temporary location. All files and materials moved to the temporary location should be carefully

screened for signs of bed bugs, along with the clothing and personal belongings of the employees being relocated.

The agency may wish to schedule an awareness session to provide employees with bed bug information and guidance

*What action should an agency take if an employee claims that he or she has bed bugs at home as a result of their being at the workplace?*

The employee should be advised that they may file a claim with the Comptroller's Office.

*Is it required to record bed bug bites as a workplace injury on the DOSH Injury and Illness Log?*

Ordinarily, bed bug bites or other insect bites are not considered a recordable injury. The only instances in which bed bug bites should be recorded would be if it can be determined that these occurred in the workplace *and* if they required medical treatment beyond the application of first aid.

6/12