

Will bugs bite at the London Olympics?

July 18 2012, By Dr. Cameron Webb



Bed bugs are difficult for even professionals to completely exterminate.

(Medical Xpress) -- Travelling to the London Olympics? What do you expect to bring back? Some amazing sporting memories? A medal? How about some bed bug bites, or, worse still, a few bugs to kick off an infestation at home?

With a global resurgence of these nuisance-biting pests, there may be a few unwelcome visitors travelling to London this year with some bugs finding their way to new homes as well.

What are bed bugs and why the resurgence?

Bed bugs are blood feeding insects adapted to a perfect [ecological niche](#), our homes and places we frequent. Bed bugs don't transmit any disease-causing nasties but there is no doubt that their bites can cause severe localised [skin reactions](#). Eradicating them imposes a steep financial cost

on homeowners and the accommodation industry; not to mention the [psychological impact](#) of having a bedroom infested with biting bugs.

While they were once common, bed bugs largely disappeared from our homes in the mid-1900s because of the availability of highly effective insecticides, most notably DDT. However, in the past decade and a half, the numbers of bed bug infestations have skyrocketed. Along with [insecticide resistance](#), one of the factors contributing to the resurgence has been cheap international travel.

It is often said that the bed bug problem in Australia was kick started around the time of the Sydney Olympics in 2000. However, the resurgence of bed bugs was probably already well under way. Perhaps it was just a coincidence that around this time that our local authorities got their first indications that bed bugs were on the rise.

Bed bugs and the London Olympics

Millions of spectators, many of them foreign travellers, will attend the [London 2012](#) Olympic and Paralympic Games. Bed bug infestations in London have already grabbed headlines. It isn't surprising given other major cities such as New York and Paris haven't escaped the bed bug pandemic either. Hotels within these international gateway cities are always going to be more susceptible as a high turnover of guests increases the risk of infestations occurring.

Don't be fooled into thinking it's only a problem for budget accommodation. Even the most expensive hotels can still harbour bed bugs. The good news is that responsible accommodation providers are likely to be aware of the bed bug problem. There are increasing efforts by industry groups to develop strategies, similar to those in place in Australia, to minimize the risks of bed bugs.

Avoiding bed bug bites

Ensuring that your room is free of bed bugs is the most effective way of reducing the risk. Firstly, check your room. But, before checking for bed bugs, place your luggage in the bathroom, an area away from where bed bugs hide out.

Bed bugs vary in size and color but as adults they are generally a deep brown colour and 5-6mm in length (but may be over 10mm when full of blood). Take a close look into the darker areas of the room - a flashlight will definitely come in handy.

Start with the mattress. Push the bed away from the wall, remove the bed sheets and look closely along the mattress seams and where the bed meets the wall. Check the bed frame and bed head too.

Check other furniture in the room. As well as the insects themselves, keep an eye out for dried bed bug poo. It appears as small dark spots about 1mm in diameter. It's often in groups as bed bugs love nothing more than to hang around and poop together. Signs of bed bug droppings can be seen along the mattress beading, around the edges of furniture or cracks and crevices in the room.

Even if no bed bugs are detected, these spots may be a warning that bed bugs are present.

If you find evidence of bed bugs, obviously request a room change. However, there aren't likely to be too many empty rooms in London during the Games. What can you do if changing rooms isn't possible?

Unfortunately, there is little the traveler can do to effectively control or repel the insects. Control of bed bugs is difficult enough for professionals and not a task to be undertaken by the traveler. Spraying

insecticides, or burning mosquito coils, around the room won't provide much protection. As well as resistance to common insecticides, bed bugs tend to hide away in cracks and crevices where exposure to the insecticides is reduced.

Bed bugs are attracted by a range of stimuli including carbon dioxide, heat and skin odors. There is little evidence to suggest that topical insect repellents, even tropical strength will protect against bed bug bites.

Perhaps the humble PJs may provide the best protection. You're more likely to get bites on exposed skin so covering up may be the best way to go. To reduce the risks of bed bugs crawling into bed with you, you could pull the bed away from the wall (if possible) and minimize any contact between bed sheets or other coverings contacting the floor. Only problem is that if the bugs are inside the mattress or ensemble itself, this may offer little protection.

Don't take bed bugs for a ride

Bed bugs rarely hitch a ride on clothing you're wearing. They prefer our belongings. Bed bugs commonly stow away in luggage. If you're looking for the least "bug friendly" bag, select something constructed of solid plastic. Bags constructed from soft materials provide plenty of hiding places, especially when there are lots of pockets, zips and flaps. Keeping your luggage in a plastic bag can also reduce the risk of infestation during your stay.

Before you pack your bags for the return journey, ensure all clothing is contained within sealed plastic bags. Research has looked at the best ways to treat belongings on return home. Wash all your clothing at water temperatures of over 60°C to kill bed bugs instantly. Often though, the hot water in homes isn't quite that hot. It may be more effective to place clothing in a "hot" dryer for at least 30 minutes. Don't have a dryer? Put

your clothes in the freezer (at less than -20°C). You may need several days of freezing to ensure bed bugs are killed, especially with bulkier items such as shoes or jackets. Just make sure all items are loosely packed.

The Games will be an exciting time in London. But if you stay aware of the risks of exposure to, and transport of, [bed bugs](#), you can make sure it isn't an exciting time for these jet-setting blood-suckers.

Provided by University of Sydney

Citation: Will bugs bite at the London Olympics? (2012, July 18) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-07-bugs-london-olympics.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.