

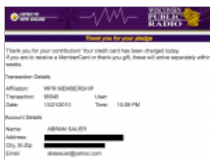
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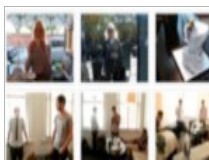
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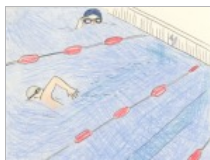
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Thursday, August 19th, 2010

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How I Fought Bedbugs And Won

by Jasmine Moy on August 19th, 2010

59



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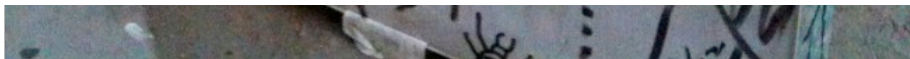
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It started with three little red dots, an Orion's belt on my arm. "Spider bites," I told myself. But out of curiosity, I asked my roommate whether she had any bites too.

"Oh yeah, a bunch, actually," she said, and proceeded to show me clusters of bites on her stomach, arms and legs.

"Why haven't you said anything until now?!" I asked.

"They don't itch, I didn't think they were anything to worry about," she said. If there's a hall of fame for famous last words, this probably deserves a spot on the wall. What ensued were weeks of largely sleepless nights punctuated by nightmares galore, and blood, sweat, tears, public shaming and the ceaseless bagging up of everything I owned.

According to a 2009 article in the Journal of the American Medical Association, in half of all bedbug cases, people will not show any visible marks, which, *scary*. You may have them now and not know it!

For that other 50%, reactions will vary. They may or may not itch, they may be small and red or larger and blotchy. "Bites are often noted in linear groups of 3, sometimes called "breakfast, lunch, and dinner," it is [often noted](#).

I learned if you shift slightly or breathe deeply as they're feeding on you, they think you've woken up and start to head back to the mattress, but when you stop moving, they then stop to finish their meal. My Orion's belt was a bed bug three-course meal.

Other frightening facts: they know when you're in your deepest sleep, so often feed about 2 hours before sunrise; they can find you by your breath because they sense and hunt out carbon dioxide; you'll almost never feel them biting you because they inject into you their saliva, which contains an anesthetic, while they withdraw the blood of their host; they can live for a full year or more without feeding, though a recent study by an entomologist out of Virginia Tech [reported that](#) newer generations of pesticide-resistant (!) bedbugs survived only two months without feeding.

The good news? They aren't known to spread diseases! At least not yet.

For me, it wasn't enough to see the bites. I wanted a visual that bugs were living in my bed. I read that they hide in the corners of your mattress and box spring. You may not see the bugs but you'll see the fecal spots they leave behind (eww), which look as if someone took a fine-tipped sharpie to the seams of your mattress.

Google Image search results inevitably show the worst possible scenarios, no matter what you're looking up, but because I caught them early (no thanks to my roommate), mine looked [like this](#), not [like this](#). At this point, though I still hadn't seen any bed bugs, I knew what they looked like. Hours and hours poring over photos on the internet and I'd become a sort of self-taught expert. They are rust colored, leaf shaped, vary in size (from 1mm up to 5mm), flat and they have visible ridges across their backs.

If you have no bites *and* you see nothing on your mattress, you're probably in good shape. If you're still worried, [don't call in the beagles](#) yet. Try this cheap, do-it-yourself test [that lures bedbugs](#) with the carbon dioxide that dry ice emits.

So, I realized that my apartment was infested. Because never breathing again is not an option, I sought a solution.

Here is a short list of things that you should *absolutely not do*. Not only do these things not solve your problem, they're expensive and time consuming.

1. **DO NOT PANIC.** Panicking leads to doing all of the things on this list.
2. **Do not throw away your mattress.** Even if you put a sign that says, "bedbugs!" on it, you never know who might pick it up, including someone else in your building, which means you're making

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Publisher
DAVID CHO

the problem bigger for yourself.

3. **Do not buy a new mattress.** If you haven't thoroughly attended to the rest of your belongings, they'll find your new mattress in no time.

4. **Do not move.** You'll probably move them with you.

5. **Do not bring all your clothes to the dry cleaner.** It's pointless, see above.



There are however a number of cheap ways to start combating the problem.

1. **Get carpet tape** (that's the thick, double-sided stuff) and roll a line of it in your apartment doorways, which will keep them from getting in or out of your room/apartment. (Some have suggested outlining your bed with it, which seems extreme and is not aesthetically pleasing but would work as a preventive measure.)

2. **Put the legs of your bed in small plastic containers** and put ½ an inch of baby oil in the containers, which will keep bugs from getting into or out of your bed (they're not good climbers).

3. **Invest in mattress covers** to cover your mattress and box spring.

4. **Buy a gallon or so of rubbing alcohol and some spray bottles.** Rubbing alcohol is your new best friend. It not only kills bed bug eggs, but also works as a repellent to keep them from laying new ones, and keeps them from biting you at night.

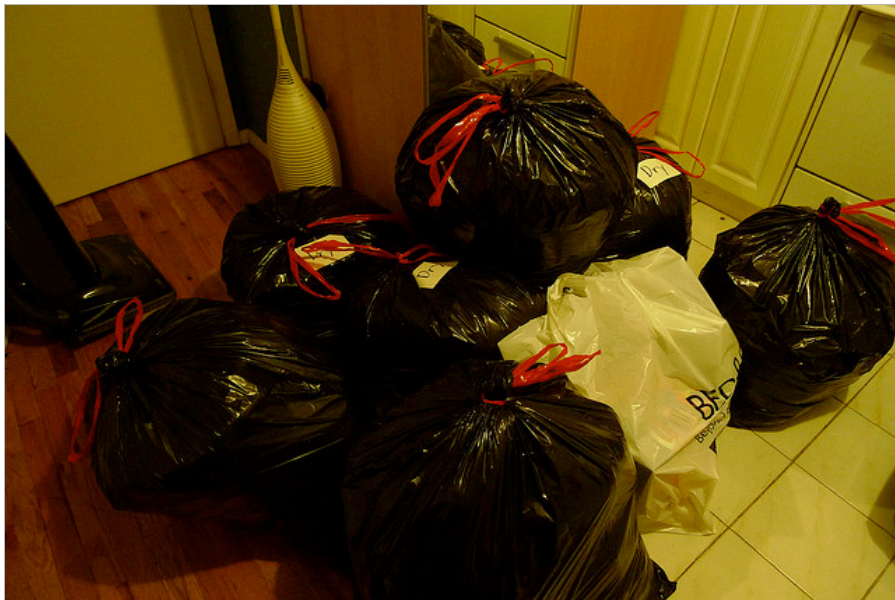
However, whatever the Internet says about being able to conquer the bugs all by yourself, I wouldn't try it. Just as it's unwise to get cut-rate Lasik, or fly to Mexico for plastic surgery, the risks outweigh the cost of paying a good professional.

My roommate had been working at a restaurant and the owner there recommended Mario to us. He was no-nonsense and comforting. He assured us that we weren't dirty people and that we had nothing to be ashamed of. Just last week he'd seen a bedbug crawling on a guy's shirt on the subway (oof) so really, you can get them any place! This somehow managed to make me feel both better and not-at-all better at the same exact time.

Before he could come and spray (fumigating almost never works in one shot, he said, and heating/freezing all your things costs a fortune and requires days in extreme temperatures, either below 10 degrees or above 115 degrees Fahrenheit), we had to take every object we owned, spray it thoroughly with rubbing alcohol, and bag it. Electronics could be given a once over with alcohol

wipes. All clothes had to be put in the dryer for 10 minutes and bagged.

"When I get there," he informed us, "I want all the bags in the center of each room, leave suitcases out, mattresses uncovered, all shelves and dressers empty. I will not touch your apartment unless this is done." Yes, sir!



Over the course of the next week, as I carried load after load of laundry up and down my 5th floor walkup to the corner laundromat, I couldn't think of anything worse that could happen to a person, short of terminal illness or loss of a limb. Even then, I assumed this had a silver lining: "Hey! Less body area to feast on!"

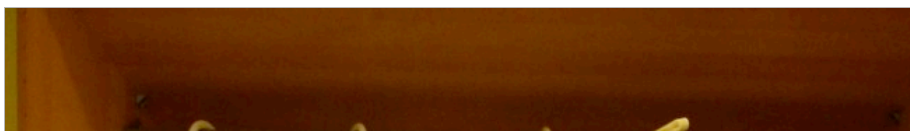
I sprayed myself head to toe in rubbing alcohol each night. I slept without covers and kept a flashlight next to my bed so that when I woke up in the middle of the night (I was being startled awake by nightmares several times an evening, go figure), I could try to catch them in the act. Why? I don't know. Too afraid to kill a bug with my bare hands, I'd probably have just flicked it onto something else to burrow in.

Every morning I'd spend fifteen minutes inspecting every inch of my body to see whether a bite I had was a new one or not (some people mark them with pens, but that seems, to me, to call more attention to them than necessary).

You start looking for bedbugs on strangers on the train. You start imagining what kind of people let them get to the point at which piles of them are found in corners, and mattresses are covered like beehives. I was afraid to tell people I had bedbugs, afraid that if they knew, they wouldn't want me in their houses. I wouldn't blame them.

Bedbugs are, in a word, traumatic. But little by little, the bags started to accumulate. It turned out to be a great excuse to clean house. Any clothes that weren't worth carrying up the four flights of stairs after their cleansing trip in the dryer went straight into a Salvation Army bin outside the laundromat. I invested in those vacuum seal bags, which conveniently also saved me a ton of storage space! I felt good knowing that all the clothes I was wearing were sealed in bags that no bug could penetrate.

Vintage, delicates and things with sequins went to the dry cleaner—but even then, you have to tell them you have bedbugs and then they may request you take your business elsewhere, which is humiliating.





But guess what? There are worse things than being humiliated at the dry cleaner. Like, say, getting bed bugs.

Mario showed up a week later and nodded his approval. He surveyed the place with eyes that rivaled your average predatory bird. From the doorway he'd spot something across the room, walk briskly to a random spot of floorboard, and with his index finger would swipe up a bug no bigger than the head of a pin. He'd show it to me and then crush it between his fingers, leaving nothing but a spot of blood between them.

He was a machine. And the problem was worse than I'd thought. Though all small, there were bugs in rooms that nobody slept in, in places we never saw them. He tore the cheap fabric from the bottom of my boxspring and I saw, for the first time, the bugs in my bed. They had managed to climb through the goddamn seams!

Mario sprayed like crazy, every inch, up and down the walls, drenched my suitcase, drenched my mattress—and in the end, he said he was fairly confident he got them all.

We were instructed to let the mattress dry for 24 hours, to sleep somewhere else for the night and to cover them the minute we got back. We weren't allowed to wash the floor or walls for at least two

months and were advised to keep our stuff in bags for same amount of time.

It's four years later, and I've lived to tell the tale. Looking back, despite the unbelievable hassle and the nightmares and all, I think I got off easy. I had some 12 bites in total, with no severe allergic reaction to them. We caught the problem fairly early. I live in a neighborhood where 10 minutes in a dryer only costs a quarter. What's more, I've been bedbug-free ever since.

Even now though, I keep the legs of my bed in little containers with oil in them. Sounds crazy, right? Well, it's a small price to pay for some peace of mind.

Jasmine Moy lives in New York City and suggests you use extreme caution before Google Image searching the subject at hand.

Previously: [Bedbugs: Is No One Safe? One Woman's Story.](#)

Top photo by pbump, from Flickr.

Second mattress photo by Commodore Gandalf Cunningham, from Flickr.

Photos of bagged clothes by proud bedbug survivor cuttlefish, from Flickr.

Jasmine Moy and 238 others recommend this. [Undo](#)

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LolCait (#460)

This was in no way comforting.

I mean: INVISIBLE BEDBUG BITES????

Posted on August 19, 2010 at 12:58 pm

[REPLY](#) » 0



zidaane (#373)

Can I crash at your place tonight? They are doing *something* in my building.

Posted on August 19, 2010 at 1:17 pm

[REPLY](#) » 0



kitten_witawip (#99)

I read somewhere that if you are not allergic to their saliva/venom(?) you won't have a reaction to their bites and won't see them.

Posted on August 19, 2010 at 1:33 pm