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Bed Bugs and Pesticides Information for Tenants in Ontario

Everyone can get bed bugs, but they are harder to control in a rooming house or multi-unit apartments, especially in poorly maintained buildings, or if there are a lot of people or belongings in small spaces. Bed bugs can be hard to see, are only active at night, and can easily hide in floors or walls that are in poor condition. Or, they can take a free ride on secondhand furniture, in boxes or on clothing. Action is often needed on the entire building.

Bed bugs do not spread disease but they can cause a lot of health-damaging stress. Scratching itchy bites may cause painful welts that can get infected. Itching and stress may disrupt sleep, and the use of pesticides might cause headaches, rashes, even more stress, or other health problems. Bed bugs can create a difficult crisis in your life. This problem needs to be resolved quickly and cooperatively between tenants and landlords.

Controlling Bed Bugs – a coordinated strategy

Control requires two related steps – eliminating where bed bugs live, and removing or killing live bugs and their eggs. Whether it's a do-it-yourself job or the landlord hires a pest control company (called PCOs), it is your home. Be involved and seek input on how it's done.

1. Eliminate places where bed bugs can live and prepare for pest control

Before using pest control, all belongings and clutter must be collected and stored in sealed plastic to isolate any bugs and for doing laundry. Any cracks or crevices where bugs hide – in floors, walls, around windows – should be vacuumed and then sealed. Check all mattresses and furniture, especially along seams, and vacuum up any bugs or their eggs. Immediately dispose of the vacuum cleaner bag - outside - after you are done cleaning. Wash all clothes and bedding using hot water and a hot dryer. Store clean clothes and bedding in clean, sealed plastic bags until bed bugs are removed.

2. Pest control and pesticides – You have choices

Some pest control companies use extreme cold or extreme heat, sometimes using steam, to kill bed bugs and their eggs. These temperature options are very effective. They will kill the bugs and their eggs in one

treatment. Pesticides won't kill eggs and so repeat treatments can be necessary. Note that care is needed with steam treatments to quickly dry excess moisture that could lead to mould. When chemical pesticides are used, not all products are created equal. Read the label carefully. Use this fact sheet to help choose products with the lowest risk.

It is your home - stay informed and read the label

“Domestic” products are those you can buy at your local hardware store. “Commercial” products can only be bought and used by pest control companies. In every case, the label is the law. The label must include the use instructions and the active ingredient(s). The active ingredient is the actual pesticide in the product and is often listed under the “Pest Control Products Act Registration Number” – or it might be shortened to say Reg. No. ##### PCP Act.

Using more products than directed on the label can be dangerous, especially to children. An example of a more dangerous use could be spraying an entire room when the label says only to do a pin-stream application into cracks and crevices.

Should you or your landlord spray?

It is illegal under Ontario's *Pesticides Act* for a landlord to apply pesticides in your home. Landlords can buy “Domestic” pesticides for you to use, or they can hire a pest control company that uses “Commercial” pesticides. In either case, you can make informed choices about “Domestic” products or ask to have a say in the “Commercial” products used.

Making informed choices about pesticides

Pesticide regulations and label directions are reviewed as new information arises. Bans or restrictions on pesticides have been ongoing since the early 1990s. Pesticides that are specifically used indoors are under review in Canada until at least 2025. Some recent reviews recommend further restricting pesticide use, but new rules and labels won't come into effect for months or even years. However, you can use the information below to avoid higher risk products now.

Options for pesticide products allowed for use against bedbugs

| Pesticide Active Ingredient | Why make this choice? | Precautions |
|---|--|---|
| Least toxic alternatives (also recall the non-pesticide options of extreme cold or extreme heat) | | |
| Silicon dioxide (or: “present as diatomaceous earth”) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-toxic chemical made from tiny dried-up sea creatures. • Very fine powder that cuts open the bug, causing it to dry out and die. • Repeat treatments are often needed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fine powder can be a strong irritant to lungs. • Label will warn against breathing dust. |
| Pyrethrins | Federal government re-evaluation proposals, as of September, 2020: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase re-entry times; greater protection for children; cancel fogging or space spraying | Likely the least toxic of this class of insecticides (it is purified from chrysanthemum plant extract) but proposals to increase restrictions demonstrate the need for precaution and to closely follow label instructions. |
| Pesticides to choose if least toxic alternatives don’t work | | |
| Permethrin | Federal government re-evaluation (requires updated label instructions as of August of 2021): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cancel fogging or spraying; limited spot spraying and for cracks and crevices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be in both Domestic or Commercial products • Despite current label instructions, avoid fogging or spraying now. • Ask PCO to avoid fogging/spraying. |
| Pesticides to try and avoid | | |
| Tetramethrin | Federal government review, in effect February 2020: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cancelled indoor broadcast (floors, carpets) and room perimeter (baseboards) treatments due to cancer risk • removed “repeat as necessary” from label | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be in both Domestic or Commercial products • Avoid use of older products containing tetramethrin • Watch for and avoid products containing tetramethrin in combinations with other pesticides |
| Beta-cyfluthrin | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allowed uses don’t include fogging or spraying but is used on mattresses. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found only in Commercial products. • Ask that PCO use this pesticide only as a last resort. |
| Cyfluthrin | Federal government re-evaluation decision: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limit domestic uses to spot spraying • disallow all uses other than low pressure spray into cracks and crevices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid products containing cyfluthrin • Ask that products with this pesticide not be used by PCOs. |
| Lambda-cyhalothrin | Federal government re-evaluation initially proposed cancelling all indoor residential uses but was revised in final re-evaluation to continue indoor use with multiple restrictions. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found only in Commercial products. • Ask that products containing this pesticide not be used by PCOs. |

Your Rights and Responsibilities under Ontario’s Residential Tenancies Act

The law requires tenants to maintain ordinary cleanliness in their unit. Landlords are required under the Act and local bylaws to maintain their properties and keep them free of pests. To do so, tenants must allow the landlord access to their unit upon receiving a written notice 24 hours in advance. A landlord can also enter a unit if the tenant agrees to let them in. If a tenant fails to promptly notify the landlord of a problem like bed bugs, the landlord may be able to avoid legal responsibility. Remember that you can only request that certain pesticides be avoided. If your request is refused, you cannot then refuse to let the bed bug treatment occur.

If communication with the landlord fails to resolve a bed bug problem, the landlord may be ordered by the Landlord and Tenant Board to take action or to pay damages to affected tenants. However, the tenant must make an application to the Board and present their case. This process can take a long time and success is not guaranteed. Tenants must cooperate with the landlord in fixing the problem by preparing their unit for treatment and cleaning or discarding any of their belongings that have bugs. If a tenant is unable to take these steps due to a disability, the landlord must make accommodations that get the job done, even if this causes some hardship to the landlord. Since bed bugs are an immediate problem that needs to be resolved quickly, taking legal action should be a last resort. If you need help, contact your local legal aid clinic or find help through Legal Aid Ontario. <https://www.legalaid.on.ca/en/>

For more information, please contact Kathleen Cooper at kcooper@cela.ca. Information is current as of July 2021.