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Bed Bugs and Pesticides Information for Tenants in Ontario

Although everyone can get bed bugs, they are harder to control in a rooming house or multi-unit apartments. The challenge increases in buildings that are poorly maintained, 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 wall surfaces that are in poor condition. They can also 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. Bites can be very itchy. Scratching them may cause nasty welts that can get infected. The itching and stress may disrupt sleep, and the use of pesticides might cause headaches, rashes, or even more stress. 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

Controlling bed bugs requires two related steps – eliminating where they can 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, it is your home. You must be involved and you can ask for a say in 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 to remove dirt or debris and then sealed. All mattresses and furniture should be checked, especially along seams, and any bugs or their eggs vacuumed up. Immediately dispose of the vacuum cleaner bag - outside - after you are done cleaning. Wash all clothes and bedding in 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 heat from steam to kill bed bugs and their eggs. Although this

option is very effective, it may also increase moisture that can lead to mould. It may not always be possible. When chemical pesticides are used, not all products are created equal. Read the label carefully and use the information below to 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 either case, the label is the law. It 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 chemicals than the label says, or failing to use the product as directed, can be dangerous, especially to children. An example of a different use could be spraying an entire room when the label says to only 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. However, landlords can buy “domestic” pesticides for you to use. Or, they can hire a pest control company that uses “commercial” pesticides. Regardless of the option chosen, you can make informed choices about any “domestic” products that are used or ask to have a say in the products used by the pest control company.

Making informed choices about pesticides

Pesticide regulations are reviewed as new information arises. Bans or restrictions on pesticides have occurred since the early 1990s. Pesticides that are specifically used indoors are under review in Canada until at least 2022. Some recent reviews recommend further restrictions on pesticide use, but new regulations 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		
Silicon dioxide (label may say “present as diatomaceous earth”)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-toxic chemical made from tiny 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purified from chrysanthemum plant extract • No re-evaluation done yet by federal government 	
Pesticides to choose if least toxic alternatives don’t work		
Permethrin	Federal government re-evaluation is recommending: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cancel fogging or spraying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be in both domestic or commercial products • Despite use instructions, avoid fogging or spraying now. • Ask pest control companies to avoid fogging or spraying.
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 products with this pesticide be used only as a last resort.
Pesticides to try and avoid		
Cyfluthrin	Federal government re-evaluation is recommending: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cancel all domestic uses • allow low pressure spray into cracks and crevices only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found only in commercial products • Ask that products with this pesticide not be used by pest control companies.
Lambda-cyhalothrin	Federal government re-evaluation is recommending: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cancel all indoor residential uses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found only in commercial products. • Ask that products containing this pesticide not be used by pest control companies.

Your Rights and Responsibilities under the *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 allow them 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 which 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 November 2018.