Travel Alert: A Most Unwelcome Hitchhiker

Our worldwide mobility is thought to be the cause of rising bedbug infestations in North America [1]. If your employees travel, they may bring back these unpleasant souvenirs in their luggage, given that hotels are one of the most common bed bug habitations.

It makes sense that these small, wingless insects that feed on our blood at night are most often found where we sleep or rest. Most people's immune response to their bite creates a red, itchy welt (although more serious allergic reactions can occur). Steroid creams or oral antihistamines provide symptom relief, if needed [2], and there is little evidence so far to suggest that bed bugs transmit diseases [3].

A cautious approach to traveling would mean an initial check of a hotel room—mainly the bed, for the adult bugs themselves (brown, about the size of an apple seed), the smaller "nymphs" (non-adult form, white, hard to see on a mattress), or the red or black streaks they can leave on the sheets [4].

Some other guidelines:
- Use the luggage rack, away from walls and furniture, or even the bathtub rather than placing your suitcase on the bed.
- At home, unpack into the washing machine and wash everything on the hottest possible setting.
- Carefully vacuum all traveling bags—luggage can also be washed, heated or frozen [5].
- Store all traveling gear away from your furniture.

Before your trip, you can check to see if your hotel has had reports of bed bugs [6]. However, the websites that claim to be "registries" for these reports warn that their information is not checked for accuracy.

1 - EPA (Bed Bugs) - www.epa.gov/pesticides/bedbugs/

2 - MedicineNet.com (What is the treatment for bed bug bites?) - www.medicinenet.com/bed_bugs/page3.htm#treatment

3 - Health Care Adviser (Spider and Bug Bite Treatment) - http://www.biteremedy.com/BedBug-Bites.html

4 - About.com (How to detect bed bugs) - http://studenttravel.about.com/od/healthystudentholidays/a/bedbugs_4.html

5 - University of Minnesota (Traveler Q&A) - http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/housingandclothing/M1196.html

6 - The Bedbug Registry - http://bedbugregistry.com/hotel/chains/