



Are you infested?

Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer

Itchy, scratchy, red and irritating?

Might be an infestation of some sort. It could be scabies, ringworm, bed bugs

or something else. How do you know? Let us tell you.

First, a warning: While very informative, the next few paragraphs could well have too much “eeeeuuw” in it for some of you. Even so, we recommend you fight through it. At some point in the future (maybe next week) you will appreciate having read this.

Some infestations are caused by insects (let’s just call them ‘bugs’) like worms, mites and lice. To think we can eliminate these is laughable, unfortunately. Insects have been surviving for millions of years and pervade all parts of the earth. With that kind of tenacity, they are sure to outlive all of us. However, there are things we can do to minimize how they affect us. Identifying the problem is a great first step. Here are five of the most ‘popular’ infestations we come across, especially in our children’s lives.

Itching and rash are common to most of these conditions, and all can be treated and eliminated. Itchiness is a good first clue that there may be a problem.

We begin with the bed bug, mostly because of its recent resurgence across Canada. Spread by riding along on clothing, luggage, furniture, purses and such, the bed bug is small (4-5 mm long) brownish insect that feeds on the blood of mammals (yes, including you) and birds. They do not carry disease or infect people, but can lead to scratching enough to cause infection. Bed bugs live and hide in mattresses, behind baseboards, in bed frames and other dark areas. They lay tiny, nearly invisible eggs and can live up to a year without feeding. Bed bugs are difficult to eradicate and demand the services of certified pest control.

Despite its name, ringworm is not a worm at all.

Head lice are another tiny little bug. This one is about the size of a grain of rice and it lives on the scalp, laying eggs called nits at the base of hairs. They also live off your blood, but again, do not spread disease or illness. Head lice are spread via direct head-to-head contact or from sharing combs, brushes, hats, headphones and the like. Treatment is relatively simple, but must be thorough to prevent recurrence.

The pinworm, our third bug, resembles short white threads wriggling around. They reside in the lower intestine and come out at night via the anus to lay eggs around the area. Itching around the anus and vagina are signs to look for, but your doctor can do a simple test to confirm pinworm. They are spread by contact: scratching may pick up eggs that can be transferred by touch. That they can live for many weeks outside the body means transfer is easy. Medicines can treat for pinworm.

Despite its name, ringworm is not a worm at all. It is not even an insect, but a skin infection caused by a fungus. It usually appears as ring-shaped, red and flaky... and again, very itchy. We also know ringworm on the feet as athlete’s foot! It is spread by touch as fungus is picked up and spread to another person. Creams and medicine are used to treat the infection.

And finally, we come to scabies. Again, not even a bug, but an itchy skin condition. Actually, the condition is spread by tiny mites that burrow into the skin, usually between fingers and toes, or around wrists and elbows. These mites can live for up to four days on surfaces and clothing and are treated by medicine, but see your doctor for the appropriate treatment.

These infestations are not about being dirty, poor or ill-kempt. These ‘bugs’ and conditions are simply happy to travel to a new host in their efforts to live and propagate. They may not be pleasant, but at least not deadly.