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Sleep uptight: Bedbug population is creeping up

Nearly wiped out after WWII, the critters are back and biting

By RAQUEL RUTLEDGE
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Michael Potter isn't paranoid.

Advertisement There's a sound, scientific reason he strips the sheets from hotel beds and pillows and even rattles headboards loose from the wall before tucking himself in at night.

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As a professor of entomology, Potter knows what could be crawling from the mattress, box springs and night stand when the lights go out.

Bedbugs.

The bloodthirsty nocturnal critters of the childhood rhyme "Good night, sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite" are no myth. They're real and are back and breeding in bedrooms in Wisconsin, in the United States and across the world at rates not seen since before the 1940s.

"It's pretty creepy," said Potter, a professor of entomology at the University of Kentucky. "It went from 'not on the radar screen' to oodles and oodles of phone calls and e-mails from all over the world."

The National Pest Management Association, with about 5,000 member companies worldwide, said its U.S. members now report getting one to two calls every week for bedbug treatments compared with none before 2000, when the resurgence gradually began. Many 30- to 40-year veteran pest experts who had never even seen a bedbug in their careers are now treating infestations in hotels, apartment buildings, college dorms, homeless shelters, hostels and homes.

"It doesn't matter if it's a five-star hotel or a one-star; we've seen it in all of them," said Cindy Mannes, spokeswoman for the National Pest Management Association.

81% increase in one year

Atlanta-based Orkin, a North American pest control company, reported an 81% increase in bedbug treatments from 2003 to 2004, said Frank Meek, entomologist and technical director at the company's training center. Also, in 2004, Orkin found infestations in 43 states compared with 35 in 2003.

Sightings of the insects are also multiplying in Wisconsin.

"Ten or 15 years ago if I got a bedbug sample, I would run out and show the secretary because it was such an unusual event," said Phil Pellitteri, an entomologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Now I see four or five samples a week."

Bedbugs



Photo/AP

A common bedbug, shown greatly enlarged, is engaged with blood after feeding on a human arm

Household Pests

HOUSEHOLD PESTS

BEDBUGS

Bedbugs — The most well-known of household pests — are making a comeback.

What size is adult?

BEHAVIOR Greenish-brown, flattened, oval-shaped, 1/4 to 1/2 inch long. They feed only on the blood of humans.

Where are they found? They are found in hotels, homes, schools, and day-care centers.

How do they get there? They are spread by people, luggage, and other items.

How do they bite? They bite at night, usually on the face, neck, and arms.

How do they bite? They bite at night, usually on the face, neck, and arms.

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Bedbugs - scientifically known as *Cimex lectularius* - have been feeding on humans for centuries. The bloodsuckers are mentioned in medieval European texts and in classical Greek writings dating back to Aristotle, Potter said. Strong chemicals such as DDT and consistent generalized extermination applications nearly wiped them out by the end of World War II.

Experts suspect several factors - such as the United States' ban on DDT in 1972, increased international travel, and the pest control industry's shift toward more site-specific treatments - have led to the recent resurgence.

A more resilient breed

Perhaps more disturbing than the revival, experts say, is that the bugs appear to be resisting today's pesticides.

"People are throwing everything they can think of at it and still having trouble getting rid of them," Pellitteri said.

Pellitteri said professionals are using multiple tactics such as steaming, vacuuming, fumigating and otherwise chemically treating infestations five or more times and still not eliminating them. He said he can't name another insect that isn't wiped out in one or two treatments.

"It's not like having a few ants crawling through your kitchen," he said.

Baby bedbugs start out the size of a period at the end of a sentence and can grow to the size of an apple seed by adulthood. They loosely resemble a tick and typically live hidden in cracks in walls, beds and furniture six to eight feet from their host.

Seams in mattresses and pillows are also preferred dwellings. They infest clean homes as readily as filthy ones and make no distinction between the rich and poor.

They hitchhike in suitcases and pillows and travel with used and rented furniture.

After dark they make near-perfect and painless incisions in the human skin, inject an anti-coagulant and draw blood for about five minutes before retreating to their nearby home to digest their meal. They can lay several eggs a day and can go for as long as 18 months without eating.

"They're survivors," said Meek, the Orkin entomologist.

Doctors misdiagnose bites

So far, experts say, it seems the bugs do not transmit diseases, although the idea is being researched. They do, however, usually leave their victims with multiple itchy welts, some so severe they require medication or hospitalization. Doctors often misdiagnose the bites, confusing them with scabies, spiders and other insect bites.

Pellitteri said he knows of a man who took his son to three doctors, none of whom knew what was biting the young boy. One doctor told them bedbugs were merely a myth.

"The medical community in some cases is on its learning curve with this as well," Pellitteri said, adding that some people have no reaction to bedbug bites.

Potter was called to a woman's home after four dermatologists failed to diagnose her bites.

"She was getting slaughtered," said Potter, the entomologist from Kentucky. "I looked at her box spring. It looked like the Boston Massacre. There were thousands of them, blood everywhere."

Ted Snyder, an urban entomologist with New Berlin-based Batzner Pest Management, said he now gets at least one call a week from companies, often hotels, in southeastern Wisconsin concerned about bedbugs.

"They're making a resurgence in southeastern Wisconsin without a doubt," Snyder said.

Hotels across the country have been sued by victims of bedbug bites. In 2003, a Toronto family sued a Chicago Motel 6 over bites they said they received during their stay. A jury awarded them \$372,000.

And although Snyder and other experts say hotels are a primary problem, Trisha Pugal, president of the Wisconsin Innkeepers Association, said bedbugs aren't a widespread worry in Wisconsin.

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She said her non-profit trade association with about 1,100 member hotels, motels, resorts, and bed and breakfasts surveyed the situation in the past few months and found that only one of more than 100 respondents reported a bedbug problem.

Still, Pugal said, the industry treats the matter seriously.

"We're providing education," she said. "Letting our members know different things to look for, different treatments available, anything preventive. We're looking at this proactively."

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