

Don't let the bedbugs bite

Experts say bedbugs are increasing in number

By ADAM BRANDT
Special to The Post

Thought to be the stuff of cautionary children's rhymes for decades, bedbugs have returned in record numbers across the country.

Experts say bedbugs were a non-issue for decades, citing the wide spread use of the pesticide DDT as a major reason for their disappearance.

"I've been in this business for 20 years," said Ted Snyder, an urban entomologist with Batzner Pest Management. "Until five or six years ago, I had never seen a bedbug in my life."

Snyder said the New Berlin company now deals with bedbug cases on a daily basis.

There is no one reason for the recent increase in bedbugs, but experts have many ideas.

"There could be a whole college course on why bed bugs have come back," Snyder said.

Snyder speculates that increased foreign travel, increased troop deployment to areas with high bedbug populations and changes in pest management practices are possible reasons for the dramatic increase in bedbug populations.

Despite the new found prevalence of bedbugs, there are simple steps that can be taken to help control the spread.

"There are three ways to get bedbugs," Snyder said. "Accepting used furniture, whether from the side of the road or your favorite thrift store, is a major source."

Snyder also warns of house guests who may have been exposed to the bugs, and "traveler's guests," or bedbugs picked up while traveling, as possible sources.

"You have to bring them into a situation one way or another," said Phil Pellitteri, an entomologist with University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Bedbugs aren't going to be crawling into the windows from outdoors."

Both Snyder and Pellitteri highly recommend the practice of checking along headboards and the seams of mattresses when traveling.

"We didn't grow up doing this kind of thing, but it's not a bad idea," Pellitteri said. "It's the first thing I do, before I even set my suitcase down."

Contrary to popular belief, bedbugs can be seen with the naked eye. Pellitteri said bedbugs resemble apple seeds in size, shape and color.

Other tell-tale signs of bedbug presence include small black marks resembling pepper around mattress seams and headboards, specifically where two pieces of wood meet.

According to a study by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, bedbug bites appear similar to mosquito bites and produce a similar itch, but they can be differentiated because of their tendency to appear in clusters overnight.

The same study also states that bedbug bites could theoretically act as a disease vector, although no cases of bedbugs transmitting disease have been documented.

Treatment for bedbug infestations can be expensive, but Pellitteri encourages people dealing with infestations not to take shortcuts.

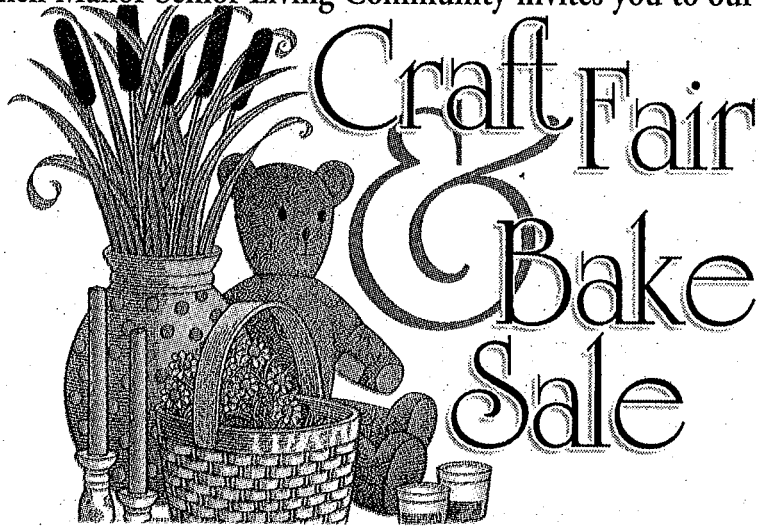
"I would say (bed bugs) are the most difficult indoor thing," Pellitteri said. "You can't shortcut this, you need to contact professionals who have experience treating bedbugs."

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