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Sleep tight; don't let the (rising numbers of) bed bugs bite

By Debra Pressey

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CHAMPAIGN – They sneak into your house and hide until bedtime.

And when you fall asleep, they crawl out for the only dinner they ever want – your blood.

"And they don't wake you up," warns local Terminix owner Bill Fulton, who's been seeing bed-bug cases multiply over the last couple of years.

Public health experts are seeing the increase, too.

After a dramatic decline in the 1940s and 1950s, bed bugs are staging a comeback, thanks to more international travel and new insecticides that are safer for people but less effective at doing their job, according to the Illinois Department of Public Health.

Fulton said he's seen the biggest increase in bed-bug cases in the last two years, but "they really started hitting the map again in 2000."

A flat, reddish-brown insect up to a quarter-inch long, bed bugs easily travel into homes and motel rooms on mattresses and furniture, public health experts say.

And you know that old saying, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas?"

Well, there's an exception for bed bugs, because one of the ways those little blood-suckers get into your home is by hopping aboard your suitcase in a hotel room – even in nice hotels.

Once in a room, bed bugs hide behind walls and baseboards and on mattresses, furniture, curtains and door and window frames, emerging at night to feed on the blood of people and pets.

Bed bugs don't carry diseases and their bite is painless, so bite victims may never know what hit them until they feel an intense skin itchiness later, public health experts say.

The bad news, according to Fulton, is bed bugs can be hard to get rid of.

Each one can lay four eggs a day, so even a few of them can cause a big infestation in a hurry, he said. And bed bugs hide well.

"You can't leave anything untouched, because they love tight, dark places," said Tom Krouse, general manager of TLC Pest Control in Champaign.

Krouse said most bed bug problems he sees in Champaign-Urbana are in campus-area apartments. And when there's a bed bug problem in one apartment, it's always necessary to treat adjoining apartments, too.

He and Fulton say each case is different, but it can take more than one visit from an exterminator to get rid of bed bugs,



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The bed bug has become a problem once again, according to the Illinois Department of Public Health, thanks to an increase in international travel and the use of safer but less-effective insecticides.

depending on how large the infestation is and how well the property owner cooperates with their instructions.

Fulton and Krouse provide the insecticide. The property owner needs to strip and wash bedding and curtains and get rid of clutter where bed bugs can hide.

It's also necessary to clean and treat furniture and mattresses, and in some cases it's advisable to just get rid of infested mattresses and box springs, Krouse said.

Fulton said he's found most people don't want pesticides sprayed on their mattresses, so he steam-cleans them and then encases the mattresses so if there are any pests remaining, they can't get out.

Krouse prefers to treat the mattresses or advises people to get rid of them, he said.

Because bed bugs can remain dormant for a couple of months, and only need to feed every few days, it's easy for them to remain undetected while they multiply or travel aboard used furniture and suitcases, Krouse said.

The best way to protect yourself from bed bugs is to know their calling cards, according to state public health Director Dr. Damon Arnold. Signs that you've got them can include blood spots and brownish-black specs of bed bug waste on your sheets, bed bug shells, and a musty raspberry odor from bed bug secretions.

Don't let them bug you

Tips from the Illinois Department of Public Health to protect yourself from bed bugs:

- Keep beds pulled slightly away from walls, furniture and curtains. Don't let bed linens touch the floor.
- Wrap carpet tape or duct tape, sticky side out, around the bed legs to keep bed bugs from climbing up.
- Remove clutter from around the bed.
- Change sheets and pillow cases once a week, and wash them in hot water or machine dry them on medium or high heat.
- Use light-colored sheets, so signs of bed bugs will be visible.
- When staying in a hotel, look for signs of bed bugs along the seams of the mattress and keep your luggage and bags off the floor and bed.
- Don't place any item that could contain bed bugs onto a bed.
- Inspect all used furniture carefully for bed bugs before bringing it home.
- Don't sleep on a couch or upholstered chair.

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