

The Scourge of Bedbugs

A Serious Problem for Boards and Homeowners

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Over the past three years, bedbug infestations have increased exponentially in New York City, causing panic among homeowners, co-op/condo boards and property managers. In 2004, there were 1,800 bedbug complaints recorded by the city. By last year, complaints had more than tripled, topping 7,000. Concern that 2008 will see even more bedbug activity recently prompted the city government to sponsor educational seminars for residents and property managers aimed at preventing and eradicating bedbug infestation.

The bedbug boom is not limited to New York City and other large metropolitan areas. In recent years, the age-old scourge has cropped up in all 50 states. The nightly news, local newspapers and blogosphere are full of reports of bedbug infestations. Numerous websites dedicate themselves to pinpointing the latest infestation sites and warning buyers and renters to steer clear. Luxury hotels have been sued by irate guests. Bedbugs have been reported in the tony co-ops of the rich and famous, in fashionable condominium buildings, in luxury apartments, in college dorms and in upscale suburban homes. Noted bedbug authority Michael Potter, an urban entomologist at the University of Kentucky, calls bedbugs the preeminent household pest in the U.S., on a par with cockroaches and rats. "This is one serious issue," he recently told the *New York Times*. "This will be the pest of the 21st century—no questions about it."

A Pest from the Past

"History is repeating itself," Potter told the *Times*, explaining that many American beds were crawling with

bedbugs before World War II. After the war, the use of potent chemicals like DDT sounded the death knell for bedbugs in America and most industrialized countries, but they continued to flourish in many other parts of the world. With environmental consciousness came safer—but less powerful—chemicals that have allowed bedbugs to dig back into American beds—often carried in on the clothing and suitcases of international travelers.

"If bedbugs transmitted disease, what's happening would be considered a huge epidemic," says bedbug expert Dini Miller, an entomologist at Virginia Tech. Fortunately, that doesn't seem to

be the case, according to an article in the July 16, 2007 issue of *U.S. News & World Report* which said, "Though bedbugs have been shown to harbor 28 pathogens temporarily—including HIV and Hepatitis B—numerous studies have shown the pathogens fail to thrive in the host enough to spread disease to people."

So while they don't pose a health threat, bedbugs routinely throw people into a state of hysteria. Wingless and about the size of an apple seed, bedbugs have flattened, oval-shaped bodies that are a light to reddish-brown in color. Feeding on human blood for three to 10 minutes at a time, the prolific nocturnal pests carry a psychological punch far out of proportion to their size.

"They come in the dark; they feed on you; they scurry away when you turn the light on," said Lynn Kimsey, director of the Bohart Museum of Entomology at the University of California-Davis. Their bites can raise itchy red welts that bedevil their victims. There are stories of people dumping gallons of insecticide on their mattresses and dousing themselves with bug spray before they go to sleep. "I have people who call me in tears—they're in hysterics," admitted entomologist Richard Pollack of Harvard University.

Tough to Take Out

Bedbugs are tough to kill. They have a hard, shell-like cuticle for protection, can live for more than a year without feeding, and hide in tiny cracks and crevices, which makes it very hard for exterminators to reach them. Their eggs are tiny (about the size of a pin head), translucent and pearly white. Household insecticides