

What the Hospitality Industry Needs to Know About the Bed Bug Threat

By Douglas Stern, Managing Partner Stern Environmental Group

If you're in the hospitality industry, this is one website you don't want to find yourself on. BedbugRegistry.com is a free public database that encourages people to report bed bug experiences, specifically at hotels. There's a quick reporting form for listing the hotel name and street address which is translated into a dot-covered map of the U.S. showing the locations of each reported infestation. A list of the hotels and other infestation sites is provided to warn travelers. What the site doesn't do is verify reports, nor does it indicate when a hotel has successfully remedied the problem.

The old adage *there's no such thing as bad publicity* doesn't carry any credence with hoteliers. They know that even a whispered rumor can have a disastrous effect on business. Websites that detail horror-laced reports of being eaten alive by bed bugs during an overnight stay in a hotel or motel play on growing public hysteria about these blood-sucking parasites. Fanned by a blitz of media attention, an accusation can instantly damage a hotel's hard-earned reputation and frighten away guests.

According to the National Pest Management Association (NPMA), bed bug infestations have been reported in all 50 states. Nearly unheard of since near eradication by DDT-based insecticides in the 1950s, bed bugs are back and in ever-increasing numbers. Bed bug reports increased by 71% from 2000 to 2005 according to the NPMA. Most pest control companies now field dozens of calls a week each week. "The last 12 months have been particularly active," said Cindy Mannes, NPMA director of public affairs. "They are showing up like never before in hotels, hospitals, college dormitories, and multifamily housing units as well as single-family homes."

"Most hotel chains don't keep track because the number is so insignificant," said Joe McInerney of the American Hotel & Lodging Association said at the 2006 International Bed Bug Symposium when asked about the growing number of bed bug complaints in the hospitality industry. He noted that there are more than 4.4 million hotel rooms in the U.S., adding "you could count the number of cases per day on one or two hands." Yet according to a 2004 survey of pest control professionals by *Pest Control Technology* magazine, hotels and motels were the most common sites of bed bug infestations, accounting for more than one-third of bed bug complaints. In a recent survey, one company reported that 24% of their 700 client hotels required bed bug treatments between 2002 and 2006. Brooke Ferencsik, spokesman for popular hotel review site TripAdvisor.com told *USA Today*, "We get a steady stream of bed bug reports and have hundreds of reviews" mentioning them. "Even if travelers aren't experiencing [bed bugs], they're becoming more aware and are looking out for them."

The resurgence of bed bugs has created a particularly vexing problem for the hospitality industry. Rooms that were pest-free one night can be infected by a guest the next. Legal experts have noticed a boom in bed bug litigation with guests suing hotels for millions of dollars. "Not only can a hotel get a terrible reputation for allowing the creepy crawly bed buddies to exist, but they can also lose out on a lot of dough," wrote a blogger on HotelChatter.com. Some lawyers are actually trawling for bed bug clients. A notice on InjuryBoard.com reads: "If you have been

the victim of bed bug infestation, it may be important to contact an attorney who can help you protect your legal rights.”

The financial impact of a bed bug suit can be substantial. In the 2003 landmark case (*Matthias v. Accor Economy Lodging*); Toronto siblings who stayed in a bed bug-infested motel room received a jury award of \$382,000 in their suit against Motel 6. In 2006, a Chicago couple sued a Catskills resort for \$20 million, saying they were physically and mentally scarred after suffering 500 bed bug bites. “I was horrified to see all of those bites all over my body,” said plaintiff Leslie Fox. “I was miserable. My skin felt as if it was on fire and I wanted to tear it off.” In 2007, New York opera star Allison Trainer sued the Hilton hotel chain for \$6 million claiming she suffered more than 100 bed bug bites at a Hilton Suites in Phoenix. Her story was widely reported in the press: “They were all over the bed and the comforter and the pillows and I pulled the sheets off and they were just everywhere.” Her attorney documented 150 bites and 23 scars. Just last month a New York Supreme Court judge ruled that two Maryland tourists bitten by bed bugs during a 2003 stay at the Milford Plaza could proceed with their \$2 million negligence suit, though punitive damages were denied.

What you don’t see is hotels suing guests who bring bed bugs with them. Adept hitchhikers, they enter hotel rooms in guests’ luggage or on their clothing. Most won’t leave with the guest; they’ll nest in and near the bed awaiting the next occupant and their next meal. Bed bugs are not a sanitation issue. About the size of an apple seed, the tiny nocturnal pests are nuisance parasites that feed on human blood. They do not transmit disease but can cause considerable emotional distress. In about 50% of their victims, bed bug bites produce itchy red welts that may take two days to develop, complicating detection. Many hotel guests check out before an infestation is discovered. Prolific breeders, females can produce up to 500 eggs during their one-year lifespan.

Infestations can spread rapidly to adjoining rooms and those above and below an infested room. Bed bugs travel easily through vents, ducts, wall voids and electrical and plumbing conduits. They can be spread by housekeeping staff on clothing or carts. “A lot of people would be surprised by the hotels we’re finding bed bugs at these days,” said Dean Henry, a Seattle pest control technician. “People don’t expect to see them at the higher end places.”

Notoriously difficult to locate, bed bugs hide in tiny cracks and crevices on and near beds to be near their food source. They may harbor in the seams of mattresses; on furniture and drapes; behind wall hangings, baseboards and headboards; under the edges of carpeting; and inside light fixtures, electrical outlets and switch plates. Your best defense against bed bugs is daily inspection by a trained and knowledgeable housekeeping staff coupled with regular pest control inspections by a firm with an expertise in eliminating bed bugs.

Bed bugs are tough to kill. They have a hard cuticle for protection. Traditional treatment is to fumigate the room with chemicals known as pyrethroids, but pest control companies have come out with an arsenal of new services and products to fight bed bugs:

- Specially trained dogs are being used to sniff out bed bugs. K-9 services provide initial detection and follow-up but not extermination. A trained dog can thoroughly investigate a room in two to three minutes, indicating areas to treat.

- Cryonite kills bed bugs by freezing them with a non-toxic, environmentally-safe carbon dioxide vapor. The vapor is particularly effective in penetrating under furniture and into cracks and crevices where bed bugs hide. Unlike traditional pesticides, Cryonite kills bed bugs in all stages of development, including eggs, and is effective against pesticide-resistant bed bugs, German cockroaches, meal moths and other hard-to-kill pests. Since it leaving no poisonous residue, rooms can be used immediately after treatment.
- ThermaPure uses giant heaters to heat rooms to a constant 120 to 140 degrees for several hours in an effort to bake bugs to death.
- Bed bug proof mattress and box springs encasements protect your bedding investment from bed bug infestation.

The best way to keep bed bugs from getting your property listed on BedBugRegistry.com is through comprehensive education of housekeeping and support staff and professional pro-active prevention and through rapid treatment when bed bugs do appear.

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