

Heading for College? Watch Out for Bed Bugs!

By Douglas Stern, Managing Partner Stern Environmental Group

Early morning classes, difficult professors, interminable lectures, endless reading lists, yucky dorm food – college students may moan and groan, but somehow they manage to cope with most of the aggravations of college life. But bed bugs? Sharing a dorm room with these tiny nocturnal vampires can push even the most laid-back college student to his limits.

Bed bugs are making a comeback in America and college campuses are not immune from attack. In the past year outbreaks have occurred at university and college campuses in Ohio, Vermont, New Jersey, New York, California, Michigan and Tennessee. And those are just the schools that have made the national news. Many schools try to keep news of a bed bug infestation hush hush. It's not exactly a good selling point for incoming students.

Bed bug infestations have increased dramatically over the past five years so it's not unusual for college campuses with their highly mobile populations to be affected. Bed bug reports by pest control companies increased by 71% between 2000 and 2005, according to the National Pest Management Association (NPMA). In a national survey of pest control companies, University of Kentucky entomologist Michael Potter, a noted bed bug expert, found, "A whopping 91% of respondents reported their organizations had encountered bed bug infestations in the past two years. Only 37% said they encountered bed bugs more than five years ago."

Bed bugs have been reported in all 50 states, primarily in homes, apartments, hotels and motels. However, 2% of the infestations reported in the past year have been in college dormitories. "The last 12 months have been particularly active," Cindy Mannes, NPMA director of public affairs, noted last spring. "They are showing up like never before in hotels, hospitals, college dormitories, and multi-family housing units, as well as single-family homes."

An age-old scourge, bed bugs, like lice and fleas, were common bedfellows before World War II. The development of DDT-based pesticides after the war allowed America to stamp out these nuisance pests; however, bed bugs are still common in many parts of the world. The banning of DDT in the early 1970s, coupled with increased worldwide travel and the rise of pesticide-resistant bugs, has caused a resurgence of bed bugs worldwide.

While they don't transmit disease, bed bugs can traumatize their victims. About the size of an apple seed, bed bugs have flattened oval, wingless bodies that are light to reddish-brown in color. Feeding on human blood for three to 10 minutes at a time, the nocturnal pests carry a psychological punch 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. Not all victims react to bed bugs, but their bites can leave itchy, red welts. Victims can become nervous and jumpy, constantly feeling phantom bites and crawling skin. "I have people who call me in tears," said entomologist Richard Pollack of Harvard University. "They're in hysterics."

Bed bugs are especially difficult to control in multi-unit buildings like dormitories. The tiny insects multiply rapidly; females typically laying 500 eggs during their six- to 12-month lifespan.

A few bed bugs can lead to a major infestation in just a short time. Not attracted to filth or food, bed bugs hitch a ride into a building on luggage, clothing, bedding, boxes or used or rental furniture. They spread easily on students' clothing and belongings, in reconditioned mattresses purchased by some colleges, and through building air ducts, electrical and plumbing conduits, elevator shafts and wall voids. If a bed bug infestation is found in a room, it is likely that adjacent rooms and rooms on the floors above and below will also be infected.

Atlanta filmmaker Kyle Tekiela was shocked by the response when he posted a bed bug film noir on YouTube. "Students from all over the country sent me videos of their dorm rooms," Tekiela said. "This one guy did a 360 where the ceiling meets the walls and there was a three-inch band of bed bugs all the way around."

Tough to kill, bed bugs have a hard cuticle for protection and can live for more than a year without feeding. They hide in tiny cracks and crevices near their victims' beds. Household insecticides won't kill bed bugs and can actually cause them to spread. An increasing number of bed bugs have been found to be resistant to commonly used professional insecticides. Experts are turning to new methods of extermination including Cryonite which kills bed bugs and their eggs by quick freezing. Bed bug-proof encasements that keep bed bugs from infesting mattresses are also in demand.

Bed bug signs to look for when you move into your dorm room:

- Check the mattress, particularly seams and welts, for live bugs and dark fecal or blood stains.
- Look for fecal smears or pea-sized pearly egg deposits on walls behind furniture, along baseboards, around electrical plates and vents, and in plaster cracks.
- Look for whitish nymph molts and old exoskeletons along baseboards.

If you get bed bugs, what to do when you go home:

- Don't unpack in the bedroom. Take clothing and linens directly from the suitcase to the washer.
- Jump in the shower and put clothing in the washer.
- Wash clothes in hot water and dry at hottest setting.
- Seal unwashable items in plastic bags and heat to 120 degrees for 2 hours or freeze at 20 to 30 degrees for 2 weeks.
- Vacuum suitcases and backpacks and store away from bedroom. Double bag the vacuum bag in plastic and immediately dispose of in an outdoor trash receptacle.
- Check sheets daily for signs of bed bugs and call in a pest control expert if you see any.

About the Writer Douglas Stern

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