

Bed Bug Invasion: Fact or Media Frenzy?

By Douglas Stern, Managing Partner Stern Environmental Group

“Bed Bugs Invade America!” screamed the headline on a supermarket tabloid. “Tiny, Evil and Everywhere” shrieked the *Washington Post*. “Bloodthirsty Bedbugs Stage Comeback” thundered *National Geographic News*.

Read the headlines and you get the impression that bed bugs have invaded our shores in force and are chomping their way down Main Street USA. Until five years ago bed bug reports were virtually non-existent in the U.S. Then the blood-sucking insects started cropping up in homes, apartments, hotels and college dorms across the country fueling media frenzy. Chastising fellow journalists, David Segal of the *Washington Post* pointed out in a February article, “more than 400 articles have wriggled into print, all making roughly the same point: The bloodsucking critters are back, and in numbers that amount to a scourge.” Segal claims that “the scale of this ‘swarm’ has been overstated, maybe wildly so. . . . ‘The bugs are back’ is so perfect a trend story that it seems hand-forged by the trend-story gods. It’s what happens when you combine a creepy villain, primal fear and squishy statistics.”

In the March issue of *Pest Management Professional*, editorial director Frank Andorka made this rebuttal to Segal’s story: “Of course, many reporters are rooting for the bed bug: It’s great copy – a cryptic, bloodsucking insect that feeds on people when they are sleeping and is difficult to control. What could possibly be a better story than that? But just because it’s good copy doesn’t mean the stories aren’t true.”

So what’s the real story? Are bed bugs a genuine threat or is this so much media hype. Some argue that journalists are feeding the frenzied paranoia of a panicked citizenry. Others point to very real statistics that show a 70% increase in reported bed bug infestations in the U.S. in the past five years. In a national survey conducted for *Pest Management Professional*, University of Kentucky entomologist Michael Potter 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.” Pest control companies that for decades had received no calls about bed bugs are suddenly receiving dozens. In large urban areas it’s not uncommon for companies to field 100 to 150 bed bug complaints a week, according to a National Pest Management Association survey.

After near eradication by DDT-based pesticides in the 1950s, bed bugs (*Cimex lectularius*) are on the rise. A worldwide scourge throughout human history, bed bugs, fleas and lice used to be regular nightly bedmates. Your grandmother’s bedtime mantra -- “Sleep tight; don’t let the bed bugs bite!” – was rooted in the reality of pre-World War II life when bed bugs were commonly found in beds across the U.S. In the 1930s, people wallpapered their bedrooms with arsenic-laced wallpaper to kill bed bugs. Metal bed frames, considered less likely to harbor bed bugs, were the rage. Twice a year bedsteads were completely dismantled and scrubbed to keep bed bugs at bay. Until the insect-killing properties of DDT were discovered during World War II, no effective pesticide existed to eradicate bed bugs. Development of DDT-based insecticides after the war allowed America and most industrialized countries to stamp out bed bugs.

Discovery of DDT's cancer risk to humans and lethal threat to wildlife led to its banning in the early 1970s. By the mid-1990s, reports of bed bug infestations began to surface in the U.S., Canada, Australia and Western Europe. With no lethally effective pesticide available, bed bugs have multiplied and spread. "Since the mid-1990s, numbers of reported infestations have almost doubled annually," said Clive Boase, author of a bed bug study published by the Institute of Biology in London. Bed bug infestations in London have risen tenfold since 1996, Boase reported. According to *National Geographic News*, bed bug complaints to pest control companies increased 700% in Australia between 2000 and 2004 and 500% in the U.S. While these figures seem astonishing, keep in mind that if a pest controller received two bed bug calls in 2000, an increase of 500% would equal 10 calls in 2004, not quite the "invasion" trumpeted in news reports. Still, last year bed bug infestations were reported in every state in the U.S., and reports are increasing exponentially each year. "This is a serious issue," Potter recently told the *New York Times*. "This will be the pest of the 21st century."

Scientists haven't pinned down a single cause for the bed bug proliferation, but cite a combination of factors, including the increased ease of international travel, lack of potent insecticides, and discovery of pesticide-resistant bed bugs. The size of an apple seed, these wingless insects are nocturnal, hiding in tiny cracks and crevices on mattresses and near beds, and coming out at night to feed on human blood. Females typically lay 500 eggs during their six- to 12-month lifespan. Eggs hatch in four to 12 days, and larva begin to feed, reaching adult status in about a month. Three or more generations can be produced in a year. A few bed bugs can lead to a major infestation in just a short time. Easily transported, bed bugs often enter a home on luggage, clothing or used or rental furniture. They spread through multi-unit properties like apartments and hotels through air ducts, electrical and plumbing conduits and wall voids. New York City recently launched an education campaign when serious bed bug infestations in the immigrant community were linked to the sale of infested secondhand mattresses.

Not all bed bug complaints turn out to be bed bugs. "I get samples every day," said Harvard University entomologist Richard Pollack, who noted that "fewer than half" turn out to be bed bugs. Carpet beetles, lice, fleas, ticks, chiggers, mites, even lint are often mistaken for bed bugs. False alarms are part of the territory, said New York City housing authority spokesman Howard Marder. "Experience shows that residents may have heard rumors about bedbugs, so if they wake up with a rash or an itch, they think they've got them. ... If you make people aware of a problem, reports about it are likely to go up."

Sometimes the power of suggestion results in delusory parasitosis, or Ekbom's Syndrome, in which real environmental elements such as static electricity or dry skin cause severe itching that is incorrectly perceived to be caused by insects. Scratching can cause bleeding welts that only serve to "validate" victims' claims of an insect infestation. Most incidents are related to seasonal changes in humidity triggered by the start up of heating or air conditioning systems.

For those who actually do have bed bugs, the experience can be traumatic. Bites leave red, itchy welts that can bedevil bed bug victims. While scientists assure us that bed bugs are merely a nuisance pest and do not transmit diseases, the thought of being nibbled on while they sleep is enough to send many victims screaming from their beds. "It's horrible. They're feeding on your family, your skin; their main meal is a human body," a horrified Atlantic Beach bed bug victim

told *NBC 12 First Coast News* in Jacksonville, Florida. She said her two-year-old would wake up crying from the bites. Shannon (who refused to give her last name) spent hours shuttling her well-covered children to different doctors before an entomologist correctly diagnosed the problem as bed bugs. In a typical reaction, Shannon threw out mattresses, beds, sofas and linens. She moved her family out and hired a pest control company to “tent” and fumigate their house. New technologies like Cryonite which freezes and kills bugs and eggs using non-toxic carbon dioxide vapor can be applied without going to such extremes. But when bed bugs bite, most people panic. They don’t care whether there’s a bed bug invasion sweeping America or not. One bug in their bed is one too many.

About the Writer Douglas Stern

Douglas Stern is the managing partner of Stern Environmental Group and a [bed bug](#) extermination expert. His firm serves commercial and residential clients in New Jersey, New York City, New York, and Connecticut. His firm is located at 100 Plaza Drive in Secaucus, New Jersey. You can reach him toll free at 1-888-887-8376 or by email at info@sternenvironmental.com. Please visit us on the Web at www.SternEnvironmental.com (<http://www.sternenvironmental.com>).