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Separating Fact from Myth about Bed Bugs

More than a decade ago, bed bugs made a comeback from the history books to houses, hotels and even hospitals across the country. Today they continue to thrive while the pest management industry continues to look for improved detection techniques and control methods for this pest.

By Ron Harrison, Entomologist, Ph.D.

More than a third of pest management companies reported treating a healthcare facility for bed bugs in 2012, according to a National Pest Management Association survey. What's more, that same study indicated that three out of four pest management providers consider the bed bug as the most challenging pest to control.

Despite all the attention bed bugs have received recently, there are still plenty of myths out there regarding these blood-sucking, parasitic insects. It's important to separate fact from fiction to know how to defend your building. With the right information and a strong partnership with a pest management provider, you can keep bed bugs from overrunning your healthcare facility.

Myth: Bed bugs can spread diseases in your facility.

While pests like ants, roaches, flies and rodents are known disease and bacteria vectors, bed bugs have not been known to transmit communicable diseases. This is a bit surprising, as other parasites such as ticks and mosquitos carry pathogens that can be transferred to hosts. Bed bugs can, however, leave red welts where they bite and can cause allergic reactions, asthma and negative psychological effects.

Myth: Bed bugs always leave marks on the humans they bite.

Many who experience bed bug bites will immediately notice red welts where the bites occurred, but this isn't always the case. In fact, many who are bitten will never show physical signs. In other cases, the red welts from bites don't show up until a few days or a few weeks after the fact.

As a result, your staff can't look just for patient complaints or physical symptoms to gauge if bed bugs are in the facility. Fortunately, there are other calling cards that bed bugs can leave to signal their presence. You can train your staff and work with a pest management professional to detect bed bug activity early—the earlier that bed bugs are detected, the easier they are to manage.

Adult bed bugs are about the size and color of an apple seed, but they disappear during the day into cracks and crevices such as behind picture frames, bed frames and baseboards, which means they can be difficult to spot. However, they leave behind small, ink-colored stains or cast skins on mattress seams, and ceilings, under seat cushions and behind headboards. Should you or your staff find any of these signs, alert your pest management professional immediately.

A pest management professional can also regularly inspect

your facility. Beyond visually inspecting for bed bugs, your pest management professional may use DNA swabs, carbon dioxide monitors and even bed bug-sniffing dogs to determine whether bed bugs are present.

Myth: Pesticides are the most effective treatment for bed bugs.

There is a big reason bed bugs are often regarded by many pest management providers as the toughest pest to control: they can be resistant to chemicals. Researchers from the University of Kentucky and Washington State University found earlier this year that bed bugs produce substances that can destroy the molecular structure of some pesticides. They also have biological pumps that can remove certain chemicals from their cuticles before their nerves are damaged.

While chemicals aren't always effective, the good news is that the treatment options for bed bugs are expanding. Non-chemical methods include disposing of furniture and other items that harbor bed bugs, laundering affected garments with hot water, detergent and a dryer, and also steam and heat treatments. Pest management professionals can use special equipment to heat the room and the room's belongings to very high temperatures for a sustained period of time, which will eradicate any bed bugs in the room.

Myth: You can prevent bed bug infestations with stringent sanitation practices and good housekeeping.

Unfortunately, bed bugs don't choose where to strike based on cleanliness. While strong maintenance and sanitation practices can deter other pests, bed bugs are looking to feast only on humans (whether they are clean or not). Human hosts often bring bed bugs into a facility on their clothes, in their luggage or even occasionally on their person. Once inside, bed bugs can reproduce and spread quickly.

Once your staff is trained to spot bed bug activity, they should regularly inspect rooms and common areas. Rooms where activity is spotted—and even neighboring rooms—need to be taken out of service immediately. Do not disturb the area or take anything out of the affected rooms until pest management professionals can inspect them and diagnose the source of the problem.

Your pest management professional can train your staff on how to spot bed bug activity. With regular monitoring and early detection and treatment, you can ensure that your facility stays clear of a severe bed bug infestation.

About the Author

Ron Harrison, Entomologist, Ph.D., is director of technical services for Orkin and an acknowledged leader in the field of pest management. Contact Dr. Harrison at rharriso@orkin.com, or visit www.orkincommercial.com for more information.