

BRIEFINGS

IN HEALTHCARE ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

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Keep Cockroaches Out of Your Hospital

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People expect hospitals to be the definition of cleanliness, and rightfully so. Maintaining a sterile environment for all patients – especially those with a compromised immune system – is extremely important, and pests like cockroaches pose a threat to that environment of care. Cockroaches can carry bacteria on the outside of their bodies, and if they find their way inside your facility they can then transfer those pathogens to the surrounding environment. But an effective sanitation and facility maintenance program can help keep these pests from endangering your patients, staff and reputation.

A number of health threats are associated with cockroaches including conjunctivitis, pneumonia, gastroenteritis, diarrhea and asthma. In fact, research from the American Allergy Institute shows that cockroach excrement and cast skins contain allergens that aggravate asthma. Because cockroaches walk through trash and filth, they pick up bacteria in less than sterile environments.

Many cockroaches would prefer to stay and live outdoors, but the German cockroach prefers the indoors. Once they're inside they will happily remain within your hospital where there are stable temperatures and ample food and water sources. Cockroaches have existed for more than 350 million years because they've adapted to their environment. When other food sources don't exist, they will eat almost anything including dust, glue and eyelashes to survive. As long as they have a water source they can survive without food for two months.

Cockroach Hot Spots

In a healthcare setting, the operating room is most likely not a cockroach hot spot, or area likely to attract cockroaches, because it is painstakingly cleaned. But the sanitation methods you apply to operating rooms should be implemented throughout your facility. Cockroaches are often found in the following areas:

- **Employee locker rooms:** Employees often store food in their lockers that attracts a variety of pests including cockroaches. Employees also may unknowingly bring pests inside on their clothing and belongings. Cockroaches are just one of the pests that can “hitchhike” into your facility.
- **Storage areas and closets:** Areas that store mops and other wet cleaning supplies can attract cockroaches seeking moisture sources for survival.
- **Laundry areas:** The warm moist environment of a laundry room can attract cockroaches. Leaking washers or puddles from dripping laundry can provide cockroaches with a water source.
- **Foodservice areas:** Kitchens, dining areas and break rooms attract cockroaches looking for a steady food source. Break rooms are especially vulnerable when employees don't take the time to clean up as they would at home. Vending machine areas and smoking areas are also often full of debris that can provide cockroaches with food.
- **Emergency room waiting areas:** Visitors to high traffic areas like the emergency room can unknowingly bring in cockroaches on their personal belongings.

Cockroach Documentation

If you spot a cockroach in your facility, it's important to work with a pest management professional to quickly identify the source of the problem. A pair of German cockroaches can produce 400 offspring in six months, and if those offspring mate it can result in hundreds of thousands of cockroaches in a year. Even one cockroach sighting can signal the possibility of a future infestation. If you see a cockroach, document where you saw it, at what time and any conditions that could contribute to why it is there, such as a leaking sink. One pest-monitoring method is the use of small glue boards, which have a sticky, non-toxic surface. Place glue boards strategically around the problem area to capture cockroaches and determine their traffic patterns. As with all pest management methods, involve the help of a professional, who can ensure that the devices are used correctly and safely and placed in areas out of the way of patients, staff and visitors.

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Cockroach Prevention

The best way to prevent a cockroach infestation is to stop cockroaches from entering your building. Since people regularly come and go in and out of hospitals, it's easy for cockroaches to enter unseen either on a person's belongings or through an open entrance. Cockroaches also can enter under doorways and around window cracks, or through any opening at least 1/16-inch high.

Because hospitals are open 24 hours a day, there is never a good time to clean certain areas of your facility. Often, cleaning has to be carried out quickly and efficiently, which makes a written sanitation program detailing all areas to be sanitized a must.

Sanitation

In addition to monitoring for cockroaches, implement proactive sanitation steps to prevent an infestation from developing.

- Sweep and mop regularly to remove debris that attracts cockroaches. Don't forget to clean underneath machines, other equipment, tables and beds. Consider using a HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filter vacuum to help eliminate dust from cracks and crevices where cockroaches like to hide.
- Clean any spills and quickly fix any leaking appliances because cockroaches are attracted to moisture sources.
- Roaches can arrive on shipments, including incoming food shipments. Inspect all boxes thoroughly for droppings as well as live or dead pests before you accept the shipment.
- Cockroaches often live in corrugated cardboard boxes and eat the glue holding the box together for survival. Discard cardboard boxes promptly.

Line and seal all trash cans and dispose of trash regularly to reduce food sources and potential hiding spots.

Facility Maintenance

Paired with a detailed sanitation program, a few simple facility upgrades also will help keep those cockroaches that prefer living outdoors from coming in if the light or temperature emanating from your building attracts them.

- Seal small openings in the exterior of your facility with weather-resistant sealant to help prevent cockroaches from entering your building. Cockroaches prefer to feel pressure on their backs, so monitor regularly for any crevices that could provide pests entry. Add weather stripping to all doors and windows to stop cockroaches from squeezing through gaps.
- Trim vegetation back from the side of your building. Cockroaches living outdoors in landscaping, can use vegetation as a "bridge" to the exterior of the facility.
- Keep dumpsters as far from the building as possible, and work with your waste management professional to regularly clean and rotate them.

Your patients' safety is your top priority and keeping your facility cockroach-free helps promote a healthy environment. It takes a team effort to prevent cockroaches from entering your healthcare facility, so teach your staff their role in the sanitation and facility maintenance process. With regular sanitation and preventive facility maintenance, you can help cure your facility of cockroach problems.

Ron Harrison, Entomologist, Ph.D., is the Director of Training at the Orkin Training Center in Atlanta, Ga., and an acknowledged leader in the field of pest management. Contact Dr. Harrison at rharriso@rollins.com or visit www.orkincommercial.com for more information.