

## Bed Bugs Bite Back

By Frank Meek, B.C.E. Technical Director, Orkin, Inc.



Mr. Frank Meek

If you haven't already heard about the return of bed bugs, it's probably only a matter of time before you do. These biting bugs were driven away back in the 1960s, but since the late 1990s, bed bugs have been making a comeback, with much of the activity being found in hotels and other overnight-stay facilities.

Media outlets ranging from small towns like Madison, Wisc. to national programs including ABC's "Primetime Live" have reported on the re-emergence of this blood-sucking pest. Atlanta-based Orkin, Inc. reports that bed bug service calls jumped 20 percent from 2003 to 2004 – after a 500 percent spike from 2002 to 2003 – and the company treated for bed bug infestations in 43 states in 2004, versus 35 states the previous year.

What is leading to this resurgence? One of the most likely reasons for the uptick in activity is an increase in international travel. According to the Travel Industry Association of America, about 27.8 million foreign visitors came to the United States in fiscal year 2003. By "hitchhiking" on the luggage of unsuspecting travelers, bed bugs can be transported from one place to another quite easily.

Once inside a room, the pests tend to hide out in the seams of mattresses, box springs, hollow posts of beds and under carpet and upholstery. There, females may lay up to 200 eggs, which take roughly six to 17 days to hatch. Adult bed bugs appear about the size of an apple seed and start off looking flat, but fill out as they fill up on the blood of their bite victims.

Another suspected cause for bedbug encroachment is the changing practices in pest management. Since the early 1990s, the pest control industry has moved away from broad-spectrum pesticide applications that and toward a more targeted approach aimed at specific pests. For example, the chemicals used to combat roaches in past decades would have been applied in such a way – and amount – that would likely have suppressed any bed bugs as well. Today, to treat a roach problem, most professionals will use target-specific baits and other more environmentally conscious measures that kill only the roaches.

While there are no direct health threats linked to bed bugs, their ability to bite and cause bloody sores on some human victims makes them a nuisance pest and a potential public relations problem for infested hospitality facilities. Consider that one biting victim successfully sued a motel chain for \$382,000 in 2003. In another case a family was forced to tear out all of the carpet and even throw away its clothes due to bed bugs that came home with the family from a hotel stay.



Will spending top-dollar for five-star accommodations keep consumers safe? Unfortunately, when it comes to bed bugs, a high-end hotel that boasts a thorough sanitation program isn't necessarily immune to infestation. That's because sanitation isn't a factor when it comes to bed bugs. In fact, representatives of the National Pest Management Association have said a one-star hotel could be just as susceptible to the bugs as a five-star resort.

What is the best course of treatment for these pests? It sounds cliché, but the first step is admitting you have a problem. It's easy to understand why a hotel or motel operator might cringe at the thought of reporting bed bug activity, but the reality is most infestations will be more trouble than the housekeeping or maintenance staff can handle. Professional treatment plans are always being updated with the newest, most environmentally responsible and most effective techniques. Currently, the best course is that of treatment and prevention. In-depth inspection is the first phase of addressing an infestation. Inspections must include a close look under carpeting, including where it attaches to the wall, and furniture, wallpaper and lighting fixtures. If a problem is discovered, the infestation can be physically removed from these target areas, usually by steam cleaning. Steam cleaners use high temperatures to kill the existing bugs and any

eggs that have been laid in the infested area. To prevent future infestations, the problem areas can be treated with materials such as repellent and non-repellent dusts and insect growth regulators. These treatments are designed to impact only the targeted pest.

The key to bed bug prevention is constant and consistent monitoring. Because the bugs travel in and out of hospitality facilities on luggage and personal belongings, it's important that "hot spots" for bed bug activity are periodically checked for activity. That way, if any bed bugs are present, it will be a small-scale problem that can be dealt with quickly and easily drawing minimal attention to the facility. Housekeeping staff should be instructed on the basics of telltale signs of bedbug activity and should apply that knowledge each time a room is cleaned.

As a weaker U.S. dollar entices more international travel to America, stories of these small bugs will probably continue to find their way into the news. While hotel managers and operators must face the realities associated with bed bug activity in their facilities, it's important for them to know that treatments and preventative measures are available. The earlier preventative measures are put in place, or the problem is spotted and treated, the more likely it can be dealt with quietly, without drawing attention to the hotel and keeping bed bugs from making news or creating legal problems.

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