

BEDBUGS: making a comeback

*Good night, Sleep Tight
Don't let the Bed bugs bite*

*And if they do, Take your Shoe
Beat them till They're black and blue.*

Bedbugs were a problem all around the world until the middle of last century. According to the Department of Medical Entomology at Westmead Hospital, they have been making a big comeback in recent years, due to increasing international travel.

Bedbugs can give you irritating bites and lead to allergic reactions in some people. Whacking bedbugs with an old boot is not the recommended treatment. Neither is the old codgers' remedy of standing your bed legs in tins of kerosene. If you suspect bed bugs in your place, the best way to get rid of them is by using licensed pest exterminators, but be aware that the little buggers are hard to kill – a full course of treatment is the safest way to go. That will often mean two visits by the exterminators.

The bug people at Westmead (who are really helpful and an excellent resource), report bedbug infestations in Australia have risen by 5000 per cent since 1999. There are, according to the Department of Housing, increasing reports of infestations in the Eastern suburbs.

Bedbugs don't generally carry disease. But an infestation can be painful and incredibly distressing, particularly if victims suffer allergic reactions. EATS has had a number of calls this year about bedbug infestations. In one case, callers found out about the problem when their young daughter came into her parents' room one night, crying and covered in ugly bites. The problem was dealt with by a pest exterminator, but came back because the follow up treatment was not carried out.

Landlords will often try to blame bedbug infestations on tenants, although many eventually agree to pay for treatment. Bedbugs can live for months without a feed so they may be dormant in vacant rooms. Infestations can spread between units in a block of flats, and infestations are known to have spread over three floors – up and down – in multi-storey buildings.

Know your enemy

Bedbugs are oval shaped and grow to 5 mm in length. They come out at night and their favorite food is human blood. Mostly, during the daytime they hide in dark places close to food. Their most common hiding places are in mattresses, bed frames or furniture, behind skirting boards or wallpaper, behind paintings, in wall cracks and so on. Heavy infestations can give off a "buggy" smell. They travel in luggage or clothing. They tend not to ride around on people. Bedbugs are fast runners and cannot fly, but they can jump.

Some people don't react to bedbug bites, others do. Common reactions are bumps or lesions, which can take up to nine days to appear, and then subside to red spots. Signs of bedbug infestations include specks of blood or dark bug excrement on bed sheets or nearby furniture. Bedbug bites tend to be in orderly rows or lines.

If you suspect bedbugs, check for signs of infestations in the hiding places listed above. You should contact your landlord and request that they organize an inspection by a pest control professional.

Treatment

If there are bedbugs in your premises, the premises need to be treated by a licensed pest exterminator. More than one treatment is usually needed.

Your clothes, linen, and all fabric items need to be thoroughly washed in hot water – at least 55 degrees C – and dried in a hot air clothes drier for at least 30 minutes. Luggage and other materials where bedbugs could nest or lay eggs need to be treated by the pest exterminator.

Whose fault is it?

A bedbug infestation is a public health issue and in an ideal world should be dealt with immediately by the landlord. But we don't live in a perfect world, and some landlords will try to blame tenants and force them to carry the cost. Because bed bugs can live for so long without food, and can move from property to property, it is very, very difficult to prove how an infestation started. Bedbugs prefer to live in places and things, rather than people. Below are a few points to raise with your landlord if s/he tries to argue the point:

- If the problem arises a few months after moving into a place, the infestation could have been there previously;
- A particularly heavy infestation would have needed some time – even years – to build up;
- If you have been in a tenancy for a longer period, and the problem has not arisen before; consider whether you or anybody else has brought second hand furniture, clothing, luggage or bedding into the premises. If none of these things have occurred, the infestation may have come from neighboring properties.

Bedbugs are a public health issue, and information, guidelines, and oversight should be the responsibility of federal, state or local governments. Many people rely on private pest control contractors for basic information about bed bugs, who in the main have been helpful. Correct procedures for dealing with infestations, and what to do with the homes and belongings of victims are not widely known throughout the community. Even doctors visited by victims are sometimes unable to identify bites or provide control advice. Public health is a community concern that needs to be overseen and resourced by government.

Information for this article was sourced from materials on the website maintained by the Department of Medical Entomology, Institute for Clinical Pathology and Medical Research, Westmead Hospital; www.bedbug.org.au, and the Better Health Channel Fact Sheet, <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au>. Both are an excellent source of information.