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YOUR HOME; Bedbugs Are Back, And on the Attack

By JAY ROMANO

THEY'RE about one-eighth inch long, reddish brown in color, with oval, flattened bodies. Though flightless, they skitter quickly over floors, walls and ceilings. They are world travelers, hitching rides in suitcases and clothing, and world-class squatters, equally happy in four-star hotel rooms, homeless shelters and luxury apartments.

They can lay 500 eggs in a lifetime and can wait a year for a meal. By day, they hide in any available crack or crevice. At night, they emerge to suck the blood of mammals like us. They are *Cimex lectularius* -- bedbugs -- and they could be coming to a crevice near you. "This is one of the hottest bug issues in a generation," said Dr. Michael F. Potter, a professor of urban entomology at the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture in Lexington. "Bedbugs are going ballistic."

Dr. Potter said that while bedbug infestations were common in the United States before World War II, the widespread use of DDT virtually eliminated them here. But they remained prevalent elsewhere in the world. Now, as a result of immigration and increasing international travel, bedbugs are back.

First, the good news: "Bedbugs have never been shown to be able to transmit any human diseases," he said. Now, the bad news: "This is a blood-sucking parasite that feeds on humans. And if they're in your house, they're going to find you."

But wait; you're neat, clean, and tidy. How could these repulsive creatures get into your home? "You're staying in a hotel room in Europe and you set your suitcase on the floor," he said. "They crawl into the suitcase, you head back home, and boom, the next thing you know you're a blood meal in your own bedroom."

In fact, another way one might bring the bugs home is by picking up furniture at garage sales, flea markets and even off the curb.

Chad Grosklags, vice president of U-Spray, an Atlanta supplier of pest control chemicals, said that once inside a house, bedbugs can hide behind baseboards, moldings, window and door frames, picture frames, light switches, headboards and, of course, in the soft, dark recesses of mattresses and box springs.

One way to go is to use a product like Drione -- a silica-gel-based insecticide that costs \$30 a pound and basically dries the bugs up. "We use a hand bellows to blow the Drione into cracks and crevices," he said. In many cases, though, a dusting of Drione is not going to be enough.

"This is one of the most difficult challenges facing the pest control industry," said Richard Cooper, technical director for Cooper Pest Solutions in Lawrenceville, N.J. He said that while bedbugs are typically found where they can attack people, "they also disperse in an unpredictable fashion."

Getting rid of the mattress and box spring doesn't guarantee getting rid of all the bugs, Mr. Cooper said, so he does not automatically recommend jettisoning the bedding. "When we work with mattresses and box springs, we use steam to get a direct kill and a vacuum for physical removal," he said. (It might help to encase the mattress and box spring in hypoallergenic covers that should keep bugs from getting out or in.)

For other hiding places, Mr. Cooper uses "synthetic pyrethroids" -- pesticides that kill bugs on contact and are effective for several weeks. But even doing that is no panacea, and any pest control company that guarantees total elimination should be looked on with caution. "Until three or four years ago, most pest control experts had never even seen a bedbug," he said. "This is an extremely challenging insect. We're not going to be able to just waltz in and make this problem go away."