

## From four-stars to shelters, biting bed bugs are back

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Nearly forgotten except for their lulling mention in a quaint nighttime refrain, bed bugs are back. And they are biting.

The wingless insects, oval in shape and about a quarter-inch long, haven't been an issue since about the end of World War II when they were by and large suppressed in the United States.

"They have gone from something that has not been seen in years to almost a routine problem," says entomologist Richard Cooper, the technical director for Cooper Pest Solutions in Lawrence.

"Many may consider this an urban myth, but, I can assure you, it is a very big problem."

Barbara Bromley of the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Mercer County concurs.

"I've seen more bed bugs in the last year than I have seen in the previous 20 years," she says. "It's alarming."

The state Health Department has no statistics on the incidence of bed bugs because it's not a reportable issue, says spokeswoman Marilyn Riley.

And it's nearly impossible to quantify the incidence of bed bugs because most pest companies do not track their calls or service.

Orkin Inc. has treated for bed bug infestations in 36 states, including New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and is predicting a 25 to 30 percent rise in bed bug infestations over the next four to five years.

Cooper, who has written the chapter on bed bugs for the ninth edition of the Mallis Handbook of Pest Control, "the entomologist's bible," says that nationwide "a few calls a year have increased to hundreds. That's a staggering increase and very significant."

The problem is particularly concentrated in the urban centers of the Northeast, says Cooper. "Boston, New York City, Washington, certainly New Jersey."

But it's a problem with no boundaries, he says. No region, no matter how rural, is immune.

-- -- No one can say for certain why there has been a re-emergence of a creature best known as the villain of a good-night rhyme. The predominant theory is that the pests, "excellent hitchhikers" as Cooper says, have infiltrated clothing and luggage and been carried back from places in the world where they are common.

With the steady increase of international travel, bed bugs not only have found a way into the country, but they have staked out their territory in hotel rooms and private homes.

There's a misconception that they start out in the bedding or mattress, says Cooper. Actually, they first squat in areas where they won't be disturbed. Once they are lodged - in cracks and crevices, behind baseboards, headboards and picture frames, even behind wallpaper - they begin scouting for a meal, preferably human. Crawling quickly and at night, they locate a host by its warmth, pierce the skin and feast on the blood. From tannish brown, their color deepens after a blood meal, which is their only sustenance.

*Cimex lectularius*, the common bed bug, sheds its skin five times on its way to becoming an adult and requires a blood meal at each juncture, typically once a month. However, they can survive for months without a meal.

Cooper says there is no proof the bed bugs spread disease with their bite. Like mosquitoes, though, they may harbor pathogens that lead to itching and inflammation at the site of the bite.

"I think they take a bigger toll emotionally on the person who happens to wake up and find themselves hosting a meal," he says.

-- -- -- One bed bug myth is that they thrive in unsanitary conditions. But Cooper says they seem to strike at those in the lower socio-economic strata because they are able to spread well when people are in close quarters.

"It's nothing to do with uncleanliness," he says. "They can be found everywhere from a four-star hotel to a shelter."

And while international travel appears to be the reason for their appearance in hotels, second-hand furniture may be part of the reason for the migration into the private sector of single-family homes.

"Look at it this way," says Cooper. "You see hundreds or thousands of bed bugs crawling over a mattress, your immediate reaction is to take the mattress, box spring and bedding to the curb. Often, those things will be picked up by someone else and that is how they can spread throughout an apartment complex."

"It's a real nightmare . . . I wouldn't wish it on anyone," says Cooper.

By the way, if you've seen them, "it's bad," he says. It takes several months for them to become well-established; when you see them, it means they've taken over.

If that is the case, professional help is the only viable option.

"There are some problems consumers can take care of themselves, but this is one where they won't succeed," says Cooper. "Truly, a professional is required."

While it is relatively easy to eliminate a majority of bed bugs, there will be a small percentage that will disperse in an unpredictable fashion.

"You cannot find every one," says Cooper.

The pesticide DDT was the weapon wielded by past generations, but that is no longer an option.

"Today, chemicals are not as persistent and their use is much more restricted," says Cooper. In fact, bed bugs cannot be eradicated with conventional pesticides and methods.

It's a problem that has been dormant for 50 years, so there are not a lot of people able to handle this, says Cooper.

Even the urban entomologists who met in May for the National Urban Entomology Conference in Phoenix are not aware of what is going on because they've never dealt with this first hand, says Cooper. "It's a new and emerging pest problem."

NOTE: For more information about bed bugs, look online ([www.cooperpest.com](http://www.cooperpest.com)) and follow the links.