

Sleep tight, because the bed bugs will bite

By Paul Breschuk
Features Editor, The Lance
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Bedbugs, the lentil-sized, blood-drinking, itch-causing biters of our flesh have made a dramatic comeback in the last 10 years. And like the sleep-fearing teens of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, many of us have begun to look at our beds with mistrust.

Experts blame this resurgence on increased international travel, decreased vigilance, and the banning of synthetic pesticides such as DDT. During this time, bedbugs have thus leapt from the harmless contents of a fictitious limerick to the sinister contents of our actual beds.

“Windsor seems to have a higher than normal bedbug population,” said Bruno Levesque, regional branch manager for Orkin Pest Control Services Canada. “I do all Southwestern Ontario and I find Windsor is a definite hotspot for bedbugs. I am in Windsor right now, actually,” said Levesque, dispatched to the city from his office in London, Ontario.

Levesque links Windsor’s bedbug infestation to nearby Detroit, a city which ranks third only to New York and Philadelphia in North American bedbug counts. But the problem has been growing everywhere, from rural communities to world-class cities.

“The percentage of bedbug problems has been increasing exponentially in recent years. It really has become a pandemic,” said Levesque. “Ten years ago, maybe we would get a few bedbug calls a month. Even just a couple years ago we might be doing a few bedbug calls per week. It has now gotten to the point where most technicians are doing a few bedbug jobs a day.”

The exponential growth of bedbugs throughout a decade offers a macro-level view of the amazing reproductivity they show in a single lifecycle. Levesque cites recent findings showing how two bedbugs in 45 days will produce 1,040 eggs and 302 adult bed bugs. At these rates, it is easy to see how an apartment building can become completely overrun with the insects.

Missy Henriksen of the National Pest Management Association has some disturbing findings of her own. In a recent global survey, aided by the University of Kentucky, the NPMA found that 98 per cent of professionals in Canada reported treating bedbugs in the past year. Asking in 2000, that figure was less than 25 per cent.

And as to be expected with their population boom, bedbugs have been cropping up in more places than just the bedroom.

“We are now seeing bedbugs in atypical locations including retail stores, movie theatres, and office buildings. With larger populations you get more of them crawling into someone’s gym bag, purse, or shopping bag, causing the infestations to spread to non-sleeping locations,” said Henriksen of the hitchhiking pests.

Still, hotels and apartments remain hardest hit by the bug. But there are steps one can take to ensure a good night’s rest.

When traveling, it is always a good idea to inspect one’s sleeping quarters before unpacking. According to Henriksen, particular attention should be given to the mattress and box spring—where you are most likely to

see the signs of an infestation. Here, both along the seams and underneath the mattress, one should look for bedbug droppings. The telltale signs of the bug's presence, these droppings look like little brown specs. Some experts have compared them to flakes of pepper. They are, in fact, dried blood fecal matter. In hotels, it is also recommended to lift the headboard off the wall to inspect a possible hiding spot of the bugs. If any hints of bedbugs are found, it may already be too late. During the time one takes inspecting the room, the pests may have already crawled into bags of luggage. This is why bedbug experts suggest the storing of luggage on metal racks instead of the carpeted floor—or worse, the bed.

Making infestation predictions doubly difficult, bedbugs do not observe the hotel star rating system. They live wherever there is a warm meal, from a Motel 6 to the Ritz-Carlton. But while the equal-opportunist pests continue to spread like a common cold throughout the neighborhoods of average Canadians, the stigma of shame and embarrassment is eroding. People are no longer afraid to speak out and to take action. For a renter, the landlord should know immediately about the problem. If action is not then taken to fumigate the residence, the renter should obtain legal advice.

“The first thing I would do is to ask if there had ever been bedbugs in the apartment,” said Martha Lewis, Executive Director of BC’s Tenant Resource and Advisory Centre. “Then you should get the landlord to sign in writing, yes or no.”

The reason for this, according to Lewis, is litigation. “If you have gone to a site and the landlord says there has never been bedbugs. The landlord can then blame you if they eventually crop up,” said Lewis.

Similarly, if you can prove that the landlord was deceptive, you may be entitled to reparations for damages caused by the bugs. But the problems associated with bedbugs can go beyond monetary values.

The search for bedbugs is made more difficult by the nature of the pests, as they can hide up to a year without a human meal. This means that just a handful of bedbugs living undetected behind walls or under carpets can take over your apartment at any time.

The best advice Lewis can offer, however, urges one to show caution when buying second-hand furniture. What we should avoid like the plague, however, is furniture left outdoors by the road. Despite being “free,” such an item could be a Trojan horse of bedbugs.

The concern about used furniture is also reiterated by Diane Rawlings, Department Head of the University of Windsor’s Residence Services. She chalks up the dormitory’s clean track record, with only three cases of bedbugs in the last several years, to a furniture policy.

“The difference here, compared to off-campus, is that we provide furniture for students when they live in residence,” said Rawlings. “Limiting the amount of outside furniture that comes in has really alleviated the risk of bedbug infestations.”

Michael Goldman, an Associate Certified Entomologist at Purity Pest Control Limited, sees the record-breaking rise of bedbugs as “just the beginning.” Goldman maintains that since the banning of organophosphates, such as diazinon, the pest control industry has become virtually toothless in their war against bedbugs.

“If we still had diazinon today, we would not be in this situation,” said Goldman. “Also, if you are taking away a tool, replace it with something. Our government did not do this, and so we are left using an inferior chemical which bedbugs are already showing a huge resistance to.”

Goldman warns that the chemical being used today, permethrin does not even kill the bedbug eggs. The ineffectuality of the new chemicals has brought Goldman to twice visit Health Canada’s Pest Management Regulatory Agency in Ottawa, asking them to reconsider the diazinon ban. Both attempts had been rejected.

When asked about how a return of diazinon would fit in the recent “green solution” craze, Goldman laughed at the question’s inherent contradiction. After all, what can be green about the systematic killing of bed bugs, or any pest species for that matter?

“I do a lot of home inspections,” said Goldman. “When I go into someone’s house I can tell if they are green and environmentally conscious. But when a mother’s child is being bitten, green goes out the window.”