

11-12-10 Bed Bugs: Don't Let'm Bite

I think I might be a health agent. I recently dreamed about someone with an insect sniffing dog. (Yes, they do exist!) In particular, the dog had the ability to sniff out the coriander-like odor of bed bugs. The next morning's email contained a request for a column about bed bugs. So, okay, I am a health agent. Somebody has to do it. It might as well be someone who cares and who enjoys learning about all this crazy stuff.

Bed bugs have been on the increase for many years now, in part, due to resistance to chemical pesticides. It serves as another reminder to use them only when necessary. Areas with high turnover of tenancy, such as college towns, have increasingly adopted local by-laws banning the placement of mattresses and/or furniture on the sidewalk for disposal, where they are frequently taken by others for re-use. In that case, the delighted taker may be bringing home more than a free couch. Another health agent recently told me about her friend who discovered bed bugs in a new mattress and did not succeed in her attempts to get her money back or exchange the mattress, and, so she decided to throw it away but render it unusable. She planned on slashing it open but did not want to open it in her apartment. Instead, she placed it on the sidewalk and returned a minute later with a knife for slashing, only to find the mattress already gone. And, so, another family of bed bugs goes traveling.

Of course the presence of bugs in our furniture or beds gives us the creeps but know this: They do not spread disease. They do bite us for their blood meal but, unlike the mosquito or tick, their saliva is not carrying disease. People may be sensitized to the bug's saliva and may become itchy at the bug bites but at least we'll live through it, with a little help from our friends.

Aside from seeing (unnecessarily) the psychotherapist and dermatologists, our list of friends might include the following: a well respected entomologist, a well respected and licensed pest control company, a true friend for caring while not shunning you after hearing of your plight and, if renting, a cooperative property owner. The property owner is responsible for ridding the apartment of infestations and the tenant is responsible for cooperating, as needed and as advised by the entomologist and pest control experts. If the property owner does not respond with assistance, then contact the local board of health for guidance and help in enforcing the applicable laws for landlords.

Don't have an entomologist for a friend? It is time to get one, then. I have a favorite for ticks, another for mosquitoes and a favorite infectious disease specialist. My favorite bug guy for indentifying insects and for advice on head lice and bed bugs is Richard Pollack. Many years ago, when speaking to health agents on responding to outbreaks of head lice in schools, he concluded with, "And do you know about bed bugs? If you haven't seen them yet, get ready because they are coming!" And he was right.

He worked for many years with the Harvard School of Public Health and now has his own company and website called “Identify US “ (identification products & services). I’ve sent digital pictures to him for free and actual insects to be identified for twenty dollars. That’s a good deal and much less expensive than the therapist, the dermatologist or unnecessary application of pesticides. Go to his website for expert advice on treating for bed bugs at <http://identify.us.com/bed-bugs/BedBug-FAQS/what-to-know-about-insecticides.html>

At this website you’ll find all the information you will need to get through the creepy experience, which may be minor or major. On the minor end of the range, you are able to identify the source of the bed bugs, say a recent thrift shop acquisition and you get rid of the item or even learn how to treat it. On the other end of the bed bug spectrum you discover that the whole apartment building has to be vacated, wrapped up like a Christo art installation and fumigated under pressure so that every crack and crevice is treated. A specialized van may be used to bag and heat furniture and beds to kill all bugs, so that they don’t have to be discarded. Do some background checking on that service, be convinced that it is not a charlatan, and get a guarantee on the results.

Other pesticide-free responses include sticky tape facing outward around bed and furniture legs, as these unwanted visitors cannot fly and can only arrive on your bed by crawling there. Such inert substances as diatomaceous earth and plates of talcum powder can still act as insecticides because, remember the “cide” means kill, even if it is by dust getting into their body parts and interfering with their ability to groom or shed.

Once you have identified the insect as bed bugs, found and treated the source and hiding areas, it is important to seal cracks if the infested area shares walls with other living areas, such as in apartment buildings and dorms. Large openings, such as around baseboard pipes can be sealed with spray foam insulation. (Careful! A dab will do, as it expands rapidly.) Tiny cracks in baseboards can be filled with putty and paint.

There, now. You were never at risk of disease but you needed eradication of the tiny monster depriving you of your sanity and your sleep. Now, the place is clean, items have been replaced or treated and cracks are sealed against future invasions.

Now you know whom you are not sleeping with and that is a relief.

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