

6-11-10 What's Bugging You?

Children's songs and fairy tales document history and keep it alive with repetition. The retelling becomes tradition and somewhere along the line, it becomes comforting, while we forget the origins. Take for example, "Good night. Sleep tight. Don't let the bed bugs bite." Who hasn't heard it or said it? It was okay to giggle because we were certain it did not apply "nowadays". It would never happen to us. The bedtime ritual is just a reminder of how real it used to be. Or so we thought.

They are actually now on the rise. Health agents get calls about bed bugs in hotels, apartments and college dorms. The bugs multiply rapidly, are difficult to eradicate, leave behind tell tale stains and odors and their bites make their human bedmates go crazy with scratching. Despite the creepiness factor of bedbugs, they, like their friends, the head lice, are not known to spread disease. So, what's the big deal?

Some insects such as body lice and fleas are known to be vectors of disease such as louse-borne typhus and the plague, respectively. Many of us tend to group our bugs all in one classification of creepy and unwanted and, therefore, the little head lice and bed bugs get a bad rap, even though they are really just a nuisance.

That's right; a nuisance. They are a nuisance to be dealt with because they make us lose sleep. We lose sleep with scratching and, once the cause of scratching is discovered, we tend to lose sleep worrying and wondering and cleaning and vacuuming and laundering. It's the anxiety and loss of sleep that are the public health problems.

We also lose a lot of money on products and methods promoted as necessary to eradicate the creeping crawling enemy. In truth, sometimes the touted cures are worse than the problem. Dousing our houses and soaking our children in pesticides is not necessary if, in the case of head lice, you take the time to mechanically comb out the lice and the nits. Along the way, you learn the origin of the phrase "nit-picker". It is beneficial to have these learned conversations with our children. They are so full of discoveries!

For more information on lice visit: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html> and for information on bedbugs, visit: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/bedbugs/>. There, you can read to your heart's content what Harvard University's School of Public Health's professor, Richard Pollack has to say on our arthropod companions. You can even send samples to him!

I thought of Professor Pollack recently, as I encountered a week right out of a Salvador Dali painting. People brought in samples of beetles thinking they were the dreaded Asian Long Horn Beetle that's been eating up so many of our deciduous trees in other towns and cities not so

far away. Fortunately for us, it was not the reportable invasive enemy but the common Whitespotted Sawyer beetle. Good for those informed residents, though, for being so alert!

Along with the expected calls about mosquitoes and ants, I was able to identify the common millipede, enjoying the recent moist conditions. Then there was the call about the worms. Well, it turns out they weren't really worms, as in earth worms, but they were the hairy larval form of a beetle, the carpet beetle, to be exact. There are a few varieties and I am still in the process of identifying which one invaded a home. A local pest management company respectfully passed along the request to another, as he had little experience with this particular pest.

The carpet beetle makes for interesting reading, playing a role in museums and libraries and textile factories, while it enjoys its meals of linen, silk and wool. When traveling out of the museums and finding itself in the local household, linty dust will do in a pinch, for the carpet beetle turned carpet bagger. In that case, no matter how the insect arrived, via old rugs, stale pet food or animal hides, housecleaning becomes an important factor in eliminating the intruder. Frequent vacuuming with emptying of the vacuum bag is important. And don't give up too soon, for they have a really long life cycle, with more than two years possible included from egg to larva to adult beetle.

Yeah, that's kind of gross and makes me want to do some house cleaning now, which is not my favorite thing to do. So, let's lighten up first with a couple bug jokes. You can pass them along to the children while you nit-pick.

Q. How can you tell which end of a worm is which? A. Tickle it in the middle and see which end laughs!

Q. What is worse than biting into an apple and finding a worm? A. Biting into an apple and finding a half of a worm!

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