

When Bed Bugs Check In, Guests Check Out!

What hoteliers can do to protect themselves from bed bug problems

By Douglas Stern, Managing Partner, Stern Environmental Group

Bed Bugs!!! Avoid this hotel! warns TripAdvisor.com. Hoteliers are finding that notices posted on popular travel review sites can be disastrous for business. One upscale hotel saw its five-star rating on Yahoo! Travel plummet to one star overnight when guests reported sharing their bed with bed bugs. Increasingly, distraught guests whose sleep has been disturbed by the tiny blood-sucking pests are outing hotels on internet sites and filing lawsuits. BedbugRegistry.com is devoted to traveler accounts of bed bug attacks at hotels, complete with addresses and maps. Concerned hoteliers feel unfairly trapped. While hotels have a responsibility to protect the health and welfare of their guests, it's usually guests who bring bed bugs into a hotel.

Adept hitchhikers, bed bugs travel into hotel rooms in guests' luggage and set up housekeeping. Bed bugs are nuisance pests that feed on human blood. Difficult to detect, adults are russet brown and about the size of an apple seed, but nymphs are microscopic and nearly translucent. While bed bugs do not transmit disease, their bites can cause itchy, red welts, psychosomatic stress and severe allergic reactions. When their original meal ticket checks out, bed bugs burrow into crevices in or near beds, behind wall plates, inside clocks and under carpets to await their next victim. They'll crawl along electrical and plumbing conduits and air ducts in search of new prey, infecting adjacent rooms. Maids may inadvertently spread bed bugs through an entire hotel wing on cleaning carts. It doesn't take long for a few bed bugs to become a major infestation.

Increasing bed bug infestations in all 50 states prompted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to declare a bed bug epidemic in April. Pest management companies have reported a 71% increase in bed bug complaints since 2001, according to a survey by the National Pest Management Association (NPMA). Hotel outbreaks have become so numerous that NPMA and the American Hotel & Lodging Association are cohosting a National Bed Bug Symposium August 25 in New Jersey and August 27 in Seattle.

You don't have to stay in a flophouse or hostel to encounter bed bugs. Bed bugs are just as prevalent in luxury hotels and respected national chains. "Just because a motel (appears) clean and is expensive ... it does not mean that they don't have bedbugs," Derrick Bender, a faculty assistant at the University of Maryland's Cumberland Extension Office, told the *Cumberland Times-News*. While staying at an upscale \$300-a-night Annapolis hotel this summer, Bender and his wife were attacked by bed bugs.

Juries and judges have been siding with bed bug victims when cases go to court. In the 2003 landmark case (*Matthias v. Accor Economy Lodging*), Toronto siblings received a jury award of \$382,000 against Motel 6 after sharing a room with bed bugs. In 2006, a Chicago couple sued a Catskills resort for \$20 million, claiming more than 500 bed bug bites left them physically and mentally scarred. "I was miserable," plaintiff Leslie Fox told the *Associated Press*. "My skin felt as if it was on fire and I wanted to tear it off." In 2007, New York opera star Allison Trainer sued the Hilton hotel chain for \$6 million after suffering more than 100 bed bug bites at a Hilton Suites in Phoenix. "They were all over the bed and the comforter and the pillows, and I pulled

the sheets off and they were just everywhere,” she told *ABC News*. In 2008, a guest at San Francisco’s Ramada Plaza Hotel received a \$71,000 out-of-court settlement, the largest to date, after 400 bed bug bites left her with a disfiguring skin condition.

While some hoteliers have irresponsibly ignored guests’ complaints, in most cases the hotel didn’t realize the room was infested when guests checked in. A 2008 suit against the owners of the Milford Plaza hotel in Manhattan (*Grogan v. Gamber Corp.*) is expected to test the limits of hoteliers’ liability to their guests when bed bugs are present. A 2008 New York Supreme Court ruling allowed two Maryland tourists bitten by bed bugs during a 2003 stay to proceed with a \$2 million negligence suit against the hotel and its pest control contractor. A request for punitive damages was denied, the court ruling that the hotel’s actions did not show “recklessness or a conscious disregard of the rights of others.” Three weeks before the Grogans checked in, the hotel’s pest control contractor was directed to exterminate bed bugs in rooms near the room later inhabited by the Grogans. At issue is whether the hotel and its pest control contractor should have considered the life span and migratory abilities of bed bugs when treating the infected rooms and treated a larger area. The case has the potential to significantly increase a hotel’s responsibility and liability in providing guests with safe, bed bug-free rooms.

“Those in the lodging industry who still improvidently use their unlucky guests to monitor for the presence of bed bugs run the risk of being held liable for significant damages in civil suits,” warns Timothy Wenk, an attorney with Shafer Glazer, LLP, a New York/New Jersey civil defense firm. Hotels must be proactive about discovering bed bugs on their premises, not merely react to guest complaints. The EPA now recommends that hotels institute regular preventive inspections to find and treat bed bug infestations in their early stages. “In addition to consulting with pest control managers,” Wenk recommends, “hoteliers should consider using bed bug monitoring systems in their rooms. If hoteliers can show that they deployed a monitoring system, they can later argue that they took reasonable and prudent steps to safeguard their guests from these blood-thirsty pests. Evidence of this type should be given great weight by judges and juries.”

Several effective bed bug monitoring devices have recently come on the market. Each has unique strengths and capabilities, so it’s advisable to consult a pest control professional before making a selection. Hotels that use bed bug-sniffing dogs to identify bed bug activity should consider using bed bug monitors to protect against infestation between scheduled canine inspections.

- **NightWatch** by BioSensory, Inc. is the just one of an effective new type of bed bug monitoring devices on the market. Extensively tested and vetted by Purdue University entomologists, it uses heat, CO₂ and a pheromone lure to attract, trap and kill bed bugs. It has a small footprint and has a clock timer with an automatic “on” setting and a CO₂ cartridge that lasts several days.
- **CDC 3000** by Cimex Science is a discrete, portable monitoring and trapping device housed in a briefcase. Mimicking a human body, it lures bugs within a six-foot radius, annihilating them with CO₂, making it safe around children and pets. This monitor has a CO₂ cartridge that lasts about eight hours

- **Bug Dome** by Silvandersson will soon be available from the Swedish company that developed eco-friendly bed bug eliminator Cryonite. Using an attractant to lure bed bugs into replaceable glue traps, it plugs into any wall outlet.
- **BB Alert Active** by MIDMOS, available in Europe, should reach U.S. markets soon. The small monitor uses replaceable packets of chemical attractant to entice bugs into a glue trap.

Hoteliers who fail to monitor and quickly eliminate bed bugs pay a devastating price in negative media attention, legal fees and lost customer loyalty. It pays to be proactive about protecting your guests – and your hotel – from these annoying pests.

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