

Bedbugs spreading beyond homes, hotels to find new hosts

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An adult bedbug crawls along fabric on a window sill, Monday, Feb. 25, 2013 in Beverly Hills.

Purchase Image

An adult bedbug crawls along fabric on a window sill, Monday, Feb. 25, 2013 in Beverly Hills. / Kathleen Galligan/Detroit Free Press

They've shown up in library books and hitched rides aboard school textbooks and book bags, and the state continues to field calls from frantic rescue workers and home health care aides as well as school officials, landlords and emergency crews.

Bedbugs -- they just won't go away.

"We're going to office buildings and banks. ... We've been to a couple of movie theaters, and we're going into a medical clinic tonight," Bob Zoeller, manager of commercial accounts for the Terminix branch covering southeast Michigan/northwest Ohio, said last week.

In fact, metro Detroit Terminix agents had more than 4,800 calls for bedbug extermination last year -- the highest in the country, according to the national chain.

Bedbugs showed up in Michigan about five years ago. Though health officials don't track bedbug infestations, Erik Foster, an entomologist with the Michigan Department of Community Health, said there's no indication that the spread is slowing.

That the bugs now are showing up more often in public places is a natural progression of the spreading infestation. Bugs now are well established in homes, nursing homes and hotels and are being transported into restaurants, bus stations, movie theaters and other public places by unwitting residents of the infested homes and their visitors.

Once in a public place, the bugs catch a ride to their new home on coats and handbags and other belongings, Foster and others said.

"(Bedbugs) hitchhike by nature. They don't have wings and they can't crawl very fast, but their eggs cling, or they crawl onto clothes you might have. ... You bring them home and those eggs hatch in seven to 10 days and away they go," Zoeller said.

Bob Wilford began the Orion Township-based Presidio Pest Management about a year ago, solely focused on bedbug eradication. Business, he said, has been booming from commercial and residential customers.

"It only takes one pregnant female to get an infestation going," he said. "If I come in and drop two ants in your kitchen, chances are you're not going to have an infestation. But with bedbugs, it's a different story."

Last month tiny specks -- live bedbugs -- tumbled from several hardcover mystery books returned in a drop box at the Washington Square branch of the Kalamazoo Public Library.

The books were immediately sealed in plastic bags and the library closed for three business days while specially trained, bedbug-detecting dogs alerted a pest control company to suspicious areas. The next day, industrial-sized heaters warmed the interior air of the library to at least 120 degrees, killing any bedbugs and eggs they might have deposited.

Bedbugs are now part of daily life, said Pamela Blauvelt, vice president of operations at the Kalamazoo-based Griffin Pest Solutions, which treated the library. "We have to get to a point where we're vigilant and we're watching. "

The library also purchased a PackTite, a container that looks like a collapsible cooler and is fitted with devices to heat

items such as library books and the bugs inside them to the lethal 120 degrees.

It's something that the Suburban Library Cooperative, which represents more than two dozen libraries mostly in Macomb County, purchased in December.

"We haven't had any problems but we wanted to be proactive," said Tammy Turgeon, executive director. "Hopefully that will make our patrons feel safe about using our libraries."

It's not only good public health practice; it makes business sense, said Terminix's Zoeller. Officials at several local school districts, community colleges and movie theaters contacted by the Free Press said they've talked to pest control experts, trained staff on identifying bedbugs and set up protocols on whom to alert and which pest management company to call.

"Consumers are starting to ask: What are you doing to protect me?" Zoeller said.

Public officials say the bugs are more a pest than a real health hazard. They bite and can cause a painful rash, but they're not known to carry serious disease.

Still, it's the creepiness factor that drives consumer demands to make sure public places have protocols in place, Zoeller said.

The bedbugs are drawn to body heat and carbon dioxide that humans emit, he said. "It's unnerving because they're feeding while you sleep."

Last month, twin sisters Maria and Angela Palaian confronted the pests head-on.

They shut down their Beverly Hills home-based photo business for a week and kept their own errands to a minimum -- worried they would spread the bugs after Maria Palaian spotted a tiny speck moving across her comforter. She had been relaxing in bed watching TV.

"I went to pick it up with a Kleenex and it just splattered into blood," said Palaian, 26.

The women say they have no idea how long the bugs had been there. But they began calling exterminators immediately. Last week, cables snaked through the house, hooked to a half-dozen specialty heaters bought in by Presidio. The entire house would be heated to 130 degrees or more for several hours.

Standing in her living room, Palaian's fingers were in constant motion, sweeping up and down her arms. The cost is bad. The time lost from work is bad. But the psychological toll is the worst, she said: "You just feel that there are bugs on you all the time."

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More details: Getting rid of bedbugs

State health officials and others are teaming up to write a simple how-to pamphlet for consumers, simplifying its current 118-page guidebook. Meantime, here are some starting points:

- Bedbugs can hide just about anywhere, and they can travel along pipes, electrical wiring and other openings to adjacent rooms.
- To see whether you have them, inspect your bed, furniture and every part of the room. Look for small, dark spots on mattresses and linens.

Once an infestation is confirmed:

- Do not apply pesticides with which you will come into direct contact, unless the label says it's safe to do so. Consult a licensed pest control company for options that are safe for humans.

- Wash all linens and place them in a dryer to tumble on a high setting for at least 20 minutes. Freezing the bugs for five days also will work.
- Seal mattresses and pillows with a plastic or hypoallergenic, zippered cover. This will eventually suffocate the bedbugs.
- Vacuum for bugs and eggs, remove all clutter and seal cracks and crevices in walls and baseboards.
- Put out sticky tape to catch bugs and monitor the tape.

For information, go to www.cdc.gov/bedbugs, www.epa.gov/bedbugs or www.michigan.gov/bedbugs.