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Don't let the bed bugs bite: Finding and eradicating

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As if you needed something else to worry about, bed bugs, those "imaginary" bugs from the bedtime rhyme have recently become a scary reality. Bed bugs are showing up in hotels, dorms, assisted living facilities, rental housing and retail stores, and condominiums are not immune to them.

Let's clarify one myth right away, bed bugs are not related to housekeeping skills or personal hygiene. The most common way bed bugs enter your home is through travel. Now, we'll think of returning home from vacation and bringing bed bugs home with us. That is just one way bed bugs travel. Bed bugs like to "hitch a ride" on backpacks, laptops (they like the warmth of the computer), purses and clothing. Bed bugs also like to travel in moving boxes.

It is important to understand how bed bugs enter your home and not to be embarrassed to seek out help. Notify your association as soon as possible so the remediation process can begin. Successful bed bug remediation requires full cooperation of the unit owners and the community's association. A bed bug infestation will not go away by itself; the problem will only get worse.

Locating Bed Bugs

The first step is to identify all areas where the bed bugs are hiding. If discovered early, a bed bug infestation may be contained to one room or one unit. The use of bed bug "dogs" appears to be the best method of detecting these little critters. Bed bugs tend to live/hide in warm areas, close to their feeding area (their host). And since their host is the warm-blooded inhabitants of the apartment or home, bed bugs are generally found in the bedroom and other living areas. Of course, we all expect to find bed bugs in the bed; but many people are discovering that bed bugs are commonly found inside electrical outlets, in the screw holes where headboards and sections of the bed are held together, along the underside of bedroom furniture, in carpeting and upholstered furniture, and in clothing.

Because bed bugs are relatively small, slow moving and nocturnal, they are often difficult to detect, especially if the unit or home is not yet fully infested. If you are receiving complaints (or concerns) of bed bugs in your community, your best bet is to seek out a reputable canine detection firm to help you confirm or deny bed bug existence. In qualifying a "K9" detection firm, inquire into the training of the dogs and their handlers. How have the dogs been trained? Who is the "handler" of the dog? And, what is their experience? Ask to be present during the inspection and make sure you or a representative from your firm sees the bed bugs when the dog "alerts."

Another matter to consider is whether or not the detection firm you are using is affiliated in any way with your bed bug remediation. This may not be an issue, but it's always best to be aware when there is potential for a conflict of interest.

Once bed bugs have been confirmed and their locations identified, remediation should begin ASAP.

Pesticides vs. High Heat Remediation

For years, chemicals have been used to combat bed bugs in our communities. Unfortunately, some

of the "bite" has been taken out of the chemicals used to deal with bed bugs. Bed bugs are now displaying a greater tolerance to the chemicals in use, more in some geographic areas than in others (New York City bed bugs seem to have a greater resistance to chemicals than Florida bed bugs). Finally, the surge in bed bug activity may have some correlation to an increase in international travel.

While pesticides "appear" to be the most cost-effective method for eliminating bed bugs, several other costs (tangible and intangible) should be considered. The tangible costs involved are obvious: the loss of revenue resulting from customer "move-outs" or transfers to vacant units or the potential for lawsuits from disgruntled residents who have had a reaction to the use of chemicals in their units. Some of the intangible costs include: diminishing morale among the residents, a loss of confidence in the management firm for not making the problem go away quickly. The inconvenience to the residents associated with multiple treatments over a three- or four-week period, only to find the treatments in some instances were ineffective. And finally, there may be a growing number of complaints (some valid, some not) from previously unaffected units/neighbors who have had ongoing conversations with their neighbors-in-crisis, and have seen the bed bug exterminator in the parking lot once too often.

In the bed bug world, the fastest growing alternative to chemical warfare is high heat remediation. Essentially, equipment used to create heat in excess of 140 degrees Fahrenheit is brought into the home or business to raise the temperature in the affected units to approximately 125 degrees. Once this temperature is achieved throughout the entire unit, the temperature is maintained for a period of no less than two hours. Temperature is monitored constantly using penetrating and non-penetrating meters, while every surface (and in some cases, sub-surfaces), including room contents in the unit, is heated to the target temperature of 125 degrees.

Initially, as the heat rises, the bed bugs are drawn out of "hiding" and become quite active. Before they can respond to the growing, paralyzing heat, they become lethargic (as they become dehydrated) and die. The dead bugs and eggs can be removed by vacuuming. The whole process usually takes six to eight hours from start to finish.

With high heat remediation, there is no need to remove any of the contents from the residence. Accordingly, the threat of cross contamination of unaffected units or the recontamination of the affected unit is significantly reduced. As opposed to chemical treatments, high heat remediation is usually completed in just one day, with only one treatment. The high heat process leaves no chemical residue and the process is considered an environmentally safe solution to your bed bug problem.

The final step in the process is to "clear" the affected unit (as well as the adjacent units) by having the detection dog return to your property to inspect and confirm the absence of bed bugs in the previously affected units.

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