



# Housekeeping

by Sheryl Kline, Ph.D., and Cheng Yan

## Bed bugs: Bad dreams, bad publicity, and bad for business

Another great article from *The Rooms Chronicle*, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! \*\*\*Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.\*\*\* College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com

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Thought to be mostly eradicated in the United States after World War II, bed bugs are back; and they conjure bad dreams for both travelers and hoteliers. Despite the itching and inflammation they bring as a parasite, no one has ever died from a bed bug bite. Bed bugs do not transmit disease, but they do spell bad news.

These bugs can and have killed hotels' reputations, as well as their economic stability. On an almost biannual basis it seems that first-hand accounts of bed bug horrors are relived and retold by afflicted hotel guests on television news shows such as 20/20, Primetime, and Dateline. In the last three years alone, there has been a 500% percent increase in bed bugs in America.

So, the simple maxim is, "Don't let the bed bugs bite your guests." More importantly don't ignore them when they do. Once bed bugs are found in a guestroom, management must take swift, aggressive action to eradicate these pests.

### About bed bugs

It often seems that bed bugs arise from nowhere. Actually, the bugs are efficient hitchhikers that are usually transported on luggage, clothing, bedding and/or furniture. Outbreaks can often be traced to international travelers from infested regions.

People tend to have the misconception that only dirty hotels are susceptible to bed bugs. However, bed bugs can show up anywhere, from economy and limited-service properties to five-star hotels. Generally, hotels located in gateway cities and large urban locales are most at risk, especially those in high-humidity climates. It is estimated that as many as one percent of hotel rooms in the United States may be affected by bed bugs. These bugs don't discriminate, and are difficult though not impossible to eliminate.

Bed bugs are fast moving nocturnal insects that are attracted to body heat and who come out at night to seek a blood meal from unsuspecting humans. They have flat, oval-shaped bodies that are from 1/4 - 5/8 inch long and are light-tan in color before feeding and turn dark-red or brown after feeding. The bed bug is a hearty insect that can survive up to 10 months between blood meals and is able to lay up to 200 eggs in its lifetime.

Bed bugs are difficult to detect because they are primarily active during the nighttime or during prolonged periods of darkness. During the day these bugs hide in dark protected cracks and crevices. Their flattened bodies enable them to fit into tiny crevices - especially those associated with mattresses, box springs, bed frames, and headboards. They have even been found in light switches and telephones.

### Take action, don't wait

It is important to stop an infestation before it starts and to take signs of infestations seriously. Address guest complaints about bug bites immediately. A person who has been bitten by bed bugs will likely have small reddish, bumpy spots on their body, in particular on their face and extremities. Some people develop a hard bump with a whitish center that itches for days. Look into it and don't ignore guest complaints.

Don't wait for a guest complaint to inspect a room for bed bugs. The housekeeping staff is the first line of

*Pictured below: Bed bugs are small parasitic insects that are difficult to detect. The room attendant inspects the mattress seam and headboard crevice for signs of possible infestation. Photos courtesy of Ecolab.*



defense against a bed bug infestation. Room attendants should inspect guestrooms by looking closely at the sheets and bedding. The linens and pillowcases used by guests may have small bloodstains that look like small, reddish brown spots. Check the mattress by closely inspecting the seams for brown spots that could be bug feces, shed skin or actual bed bugs. Also, check for brown spots in cracks and crevices using a flashlight to look for signs of infestation. Bed bugs can hide in the smallest spaces between headboards and walls. Check furniture seams, draperies, molding and areas where wallpaper may be loose. Also, check behind picture frames and baseboards, especially those located near beds. And, thoroughly inspect any used furniture or fixtures for bed bug infestation before installing them in guestrooms.

Once signs of infestation are found in a guestroom, the room should be quarantined. This includes all linens, and even the floor vacuum cleaner that was used to clean the guestroom. A professional pest control company should be called to inspect and treat the infested room. The guestrooms adjacent to the infested rooms should also be inspected for signs of infestation.

### **Preventative efforts**

According to Dr. John Barcay, a senior scientist with Ecolab, there is no absolute way to prevent bed bugs from being brought onto a hotel's property. But, there are some housekeeping and maintenance practices that will help reduce the opportunities for the bed bugs to thrive in your property. First and foremost, train the housekeeping staff on how to detect bed bugs. If a guestroom is suspected of being infested, place the room on out-of-order status and seal the room. The room should only be placed back in service when it is cleared by a pest control professional.

Room attendants can practice good housekeeping that reduces the opportunity for bed bugs to spread. Vacuum rooms regularly and carefully. Vacuuming can be very useful for removing bugs and eggs from mattresses, carpet, walls, and other surfaces. Pay particular attention to seams, tufts and edges of mattresses and box springs. Take the time to vacuum the perimeter edge of wall-to-wall carpets. Afterward, dispose of the vacuum contents in a sealed trash bag.

Wash and dry linens in very hot temperatures. Tumbling dry bedspreads for 30 minutes in 120<sup>F</sup> degree temperature will kill bed bugs; then wash them in hot water. Steam cleaning furniture, especially around the seams and crevices, will also kill these pests.

Diligent maintenance procedures can also help to prevent the spread of bed bugs. Cracks and crevices should be caulked. This includes the space between the headboard and the wall above the bed. Also, pay particular attention to any small cracks near the baseboard of the wall and where the wall meets the floor. Loose wallpaper should be repaired immediately. Bed bugs are tiny flat pests that can squeeze into the smallest crack or crevice, so no space is too small to caulk or seal.

While the former measures are helpful, insecticides are crucial for bed bug elimination. Hotels should contract with a professional pest control company to inspect and treat the hotel for bed bugs and other pests and rodents on a regular basis.

### **Conclusion**

It is practically impossible to stop bed bugs from checking into your property as they can arrive with your very next guest. However, it is possible to detect, deter and eliminate the spread of these pests. Controlling bed bugs requires constant awareness and effort by both hotel management and employees. Don't ignore the signs of infestation. If you do, they may haunt you in your dreams and in your wallet. And before you know it, you and your hotel may unwittingly become the lead story for an investigative journalism report. ✧

*(Dr. Sheryl Kline is an assistant professor and the director of the Center for the Study of Lodging Operations at Purdue University's Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management. Cheng Yan is a graduate student in Purdue University's Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management. Comments or inquiries may be submitted to: [klines@purdue.edu](mailto:klines@purdue.edu).)*