

Bed bugs bite back

Why they're invading the U.S.— and how you can prevent them from coming into your home. Plus, a hidden camera 'spot check' at some New York hotels

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You check into a hotel for a good night's sleep, never suspecting that you might become room service dinner for a crawly critter, an insect waiting to drink your blood.

Nancy Duke: I had welts and they were all over my legs, my arms.

That's what happened to two women just months ago, in decent American hotels: They were the smorgasboard for bed bugs.

Dennis Murphy, Dateline correspondent: You ever heard of bed bugs, other than the old adage? **Janet Wyda:** No, I never did. **Murphy:** Ever seen one in your life? **Wyda:** No.

Bed bugs had been shown the "no vacancy" sign in the U.S. for nearly 50 years— they've been virtually eradicated. But now that's all changed. They're back. And they're in expensive hotels and biting the best of people.

It's a national problem, agrees entomologist Dini Miller, Ph.D. The Orkin Pest Control company says that after 50 years more or less without them, it's now treated bed bugs in all but three states. And according to the National Pest Management Association, bed bug complaints have increased 50-fold over the last five years. They've popped up in apartments, mansions or dormitories in nearly every corner of the country.

Just a few weeks ago, bed bugs nibbled on the traveling cast of a Broadway musical at a Ramada Plaza in San Francisco. Last summer, a young family vacationing at a five-star Westin resort in Hollywood, Florida had the same complaint.

Murphy: Are bedbugs in cities rather than countryside? **Dini Miller, Ph.D., entomologist:** No, they're in the country as well.

This is like the return of the woolly mammoth to entomologist Dini Miller, who until very recently had never even seen a live bed bug. She says in the U.S., exterminators wiped them out.

Miller: We were just able to spray them with insecticide [DDT] which we used very liberally in those days and got rid of them. And so, they were gone from the United States.

What brought the bed bug back?

Experts say the bed bug resurgence started with international travel with bugs probably hitching a ride in suitcases coming from Europe, Asia, the Middle East — places where they've been thriving all along. From their new American base, unwary travelers carried them on to other hotels, dormitories, into their homes. And as many people are discovering: once they're in, they're hard to

get out.

One prominent authority on bed bugs is Dr. Harold Harlan, who was a career bug expert for the military. Harlan was surprised 30 years ago when he came across a few stray bed bugs in a barracks at Fort Dix, New Jersey. He carried them home with him— on purpose.

Harold Harlan, Ph.D.: I took them off the wall. But I just wanted to keep them alive and observe them. We were looking at the bite effects on soldiers at the time. **Murphy:** And you have raised the grandchildren, the great-great grandchildren, down through the generations, and begat, begat, begat, for 30 years now. How many bugs do you have? **Harlan:** If I had to guess, I'd say around 15,000 to 20,000.

He keeps his bugs in jars in his basement. Every now and then they've ended up in his bed.

Murphy: What does your wife think about this? **Harlan:** I don't think I want to discuss that.

Keeping bed bugs has obvious drawbacks.

Murphy: You can't go down to the pet store and get food for them. How do you feed them? **Harlan:** I feed them on myself. My arm, my leg, whatever. **Murphy:** Your blood. **Harlan:** Correct.

People can have severe allergic reactions to bed bug bites, but generally bed bugs are not considered a health threat. Even though blood is their meal, they don't spread blood-related illnesses like aids or hepatitis. For Dr. Harlan, the itchy red welts last three or four days.

Murphy: You know, you could have birds or an ant colony. **Harlan:** I've had ant colonies before and they're not as interesting.

Dr. Harlan's interesting collection is now proving invaluable to researchers. Some are using his domestic bugs to test against the current crop of bugs coming into the United States. So far the news isn't good. The bed bugs you may find under that hotel mattress aren't easily killed by the pesticides available on the U.S. market.

Miller: So essentially what happens is all of the ones that are susceptible to the pesticides die. And these few that are not susceptible survive. They mate with each other and produce babies that are just like themselves. **Murphy:** And they're here in huge numbers. **Miller:** I think so.

And they're showing up more and more... in headlines, on Web sites, and in angry phone calls to lawyers like Al Ebanks who went from no bed bug clients to 21 in one year.

One of his clients is Nancy Duke, a banker who spends 60 nights a year on the road. In November, she checked into the Crowne Plaza in New York's Times Square, into a room costing more than \$200 dollars. She says in the wee hours of the morning something woke her up.

Nancy Duke: I get up. I go into the bathroom and I see there are bugs on me— reddish-brown tick-like bugs on me. I go back to the bed. I flip back the covers and there's bed bugs in my bed. **Murphy:** Lots of them? **Duke:** Yes. I put my glasses on and the light on. The bed next to me is covered—infested with bugs.

Within days, she says she too was covered with itchy red welts.

Murphy: Nancy, how does it feel to think you're lying in bed in the middle of the night-- \$200 a night room, and bugs are chewing on you for dinner?**Duke:** It's dirty. It's horrific. It's with me now, and just from that incident, it's something that I haven't gotten over.

Last Christmas Eve, Janet Wyda checked into the Regency Inn & Suites near New York's Penn Station with her daughter. She paid \$159 for a two-bedroom suite just steps away from the Empire State building. The first morning, she woke up scratching.

Janet Wyda: I had some itching on my upper thigh area, but what struck my mind was that there was bumps.

The next morning, still more bumps: now swelling terribly and spreading down her arms and legs. As these pictures show in hideous detail, within days she was covered with over two hundred huge red sores.

Wyda: Not once, not once did I ever think that it would be bed bug bites.

So how do you know if you've become dinner for bed bugs? This woman had two of the classic signs — she went to bed fine and woke up itchy, and she had red welts all in a line—bed bugs walk along blood vessels, sampling as they go.

She ended up in the emergency room.

Wyda: I was terribly upset. Looking horrible. I just got so depressed over the whole thing.

The itching lasted nearly a month, and she still has scars. She says she left three messages for the hotel manager saying she'd had bed bugs, but nobody ever called her back.

Does that mean they'd fixed the problem?

Bed bugs have been with us humans since we lived in caves, and they have fantastic survival skills. They lurk unseen in cracks and crevices for most of the day.

Dini Miller, Ph.D. entomologist: Between about three and five a.m. something turns on in their little brain and they become attracted to heat. So heat, to them, means food. They're looking for human body heat. And part of the mouth part feels around underneath the skin looking for a blood vessel. And then, they hit that blood vessel and it pumps them up full of blood. And then, once they're full, they pop the mouth parts out. And they crawl back into a little crack or crevice and then they'll stay there for a couple days digesting that blood meal.**Dennis Murphy, Dateline correspondent:** I can hear people saying, "Ew."**Miller:** It sounds kind of disgusting. I have to admit. (Laughter)

Bed bugs can go for over a year without a meal. That makes it nearly impossible to know if you have any. Bed bug eggs are so very small and translucent — they're virtually invisible against a white sheet. And a female can lay twelve eggs in one day. Hotels are ideal hang outs for bed bugs because the guests get bitten and leave — a few days later, there's a new unsuspecting host— dinner— right in the very same bed.

So could we find any? Armed with an experienced bed bug searcher, entomologist Dini Miller, we rented rooms in several New York city hotels.

Each hotel we went to had had reports of bed bugs, information we gleaned from Web sites, newspaper articles and lawsuits. The search began.

What Dini knows, and most of the rest of us don't, is that in many hotels, the headboard pops right off. And behind the headboard is a common hide-out for bed bugs.

Murphy: Why the headboard as opposed to say, I don't know, the bathroom or the drapes on the window?**Miller:** If you think about it, the maid comes in every morning, she's changing the sheets, she's manipulating the mattress and that sort of thing. But, the headboard doesn't move. And so, the bed bugs can get behind there and they're not disturbed.

Dini checks screw holes, cracks, even staples. She says the most obvious sign of bedbugs is small blackish spots — "fecal spots" to the experts — that look like either pepper or dried blood, signs that bed bugs have "digested" a blood meal and excreted it right out.

We check the mattress seams, the nightstand, the chair and everything passes muster.

After visting 22 hotel rooms, in 7 different hotels: no bed bugs.

Murphy: We didn't seem to find the infestation. What do you think went on?**Miller:** Let's say we go into a hotel that's got 100 rooms, and we've heard there's been a complaint about bed bugs in there. It may be only one room or two rooms that are affected. If you don't find the one that was initially infested, you may not come across it.

One Times Square hotel had several complaints online about bed bugs and was recently sued for having them.

Murphy (while inspecting): But it looks a lot like all the other ones we've seen, doesn't?**Miller:** Let's take a little closer look here. Now, I can't be for sure, but this is the type of spotting that I'm talking about. You see right there? This is a cast skin from a bedbug. Here. **Murphy:** You're kidding. So they've been here in midtown Manhattan, in Times Square?**Miller:** Right, right, exactly.**Murphy:** You think this is a hit, this is a find?**Miller:** Oh definitely. Most definitely.

Dini says this dark spot could be leftovers from a blood meal.

Miller: These dark spots... we always ask ourselves if we see something dark. How could that have gotten there? And it just so happens that right here is a shed bedbug skin.**Murphy:** Now would you suspect that those bed bugs that you found in that headboard had been feeding on guests?**Miller:** Yes. The fecal spots tells you that they obviously had some blood in their system.

In this case, it appears hotel management went scurrying for a good exterminator — along with evidence of bed bugs in several rooms.

Miller: See around the frame? This powdery looking stuff?

Dini finds sign of pesticides, fresh mattresses and new furniture. Except for the corpses, the rooms we checked are bug free.

Next we try a moderately-priced hotel, Regency Inn & Suites, near New York's Penn Station, where Janet Wyda and her daughter stayed last Christmas, where she says she was eaten alive.

We checked into room 418. And there it was: a molted bed bug skin behind the head board, bloody spots on the back of the picture frame, blood stains and fecal spotting along the mattresses, and the creature himself. Plus a small and growing family waiting under the box spring for a meal.

We report what we find to the front desk:

Dateline: *Um, in 418 I think I saw a bedbug.***Hotel concierge:** *418?***Dateline:** *Yeah. Room 418.* **Hotel concierge:** *Okay, just a moment.* **Dateline:** *Have you had them before?***Hotel concierge:** *No.***Dateline:** *So you've had no other reports of bedbugs?***Hotel concierge:** *Uh, that's, uh just is the only one.***Dateline:** *This is the only one, ok...***Murphy:** You know, Dateline went back to that same hotel that you stayed in in February, guess what we found?**Janet Wyda:** Bed bugs.

And bed bugs haven't checked into just hotels. They're going to college too.

We've heard reports of bed bugs in at least a dozen colleges from the University of Oklahoma to Loyola in Chicago.

Just last week freshmen at New York's prestigious Columbia University had to leave their rooms because a room nearby was infested with bed bugs. And they're worried about what other students think.

Andrew, student: They assume I have bed bugs in my room since I'm moving out, and so I'm quick to tell them that I don't have bedbugs. At least I don't know of it.**Shira, student:** I guess bedbugs shouldn't have quite as much stigma 'cause you don't get them from being dirty and you don't get them from being unhygienic. It's just weird, I feel like I'm defending myself and people are assuming all this stuff now and that's really hard.

So how can you avoid bringing bed bugs home with you? Experts say check your luggage closely if you think you've encountered bed bugs on the road, and steer clear of used mattresses and discarded furniture.

And if, unhappily, you already have bed bugs? Call a reputable exterminator with plenty of bed bug experience. Expect to have several treatments that last several hours, and be prepared to throw out a lot of your stuff.

Murphy: Expensive for hotel managers. For home owners.**Miller:** Very expensive, yes.

Columbia University told us the school rarely has a problem, but when it does, the treatment is aggressive.

Several of the hotels mentioned in our report wrote us to say that while bed bugs are out there, they are *not* prevalent. They also say they use exterminators regularly to prevent bed bugs—and in the event bed bugs are discovered, take quick action to eradicate them, including “discarding and replacing furniture and linen.” The Regency Inn & Suites added that the hotel has heard no complaints about bed bugs.

Dini Miller says we might as well try to get used to bed bugs — forget the stigma too — bed bugs happen to the best of people and have nothing to do with hygiene.

Murphy: Now, is it possible this whole infestation epidemic is being overblown? **Dini Miller:** Most of the researchers believe that this is an issue that's on the increase—that's going to get worse, before it gets better.