“Sleep tight and don’t let the bed bugs bite” a phrase that has become less and less relevant over the years, even if you remember it, chances are that you have never seen a bed bug and wouldn’t recognize one... even if it came up and bit you.

The unfortunate reality is that bed bugs are on the rise and they are coming to a bed near you!

A Brief History

Bed bugs have been documented as pests since the 17th century and were introduced to this country by the early colonists. They were common in the United States prior to World War II, after which time widespread use of synthetic insecticides such as DDT greatly reduced their numbers. Improvements in household and personal cleanliness as well as increased regulation of the used furniture market also likely contributed to their reduced pest status.

In the past decade, bed bugs have begun making a comeback across the United States. The widespread use of baits rather than insecticide sprays for ant and cockroach control is a factor that has been implicated in their return. International travel and commerce are thought to facilitate the spread of these insect hitchhikers, because eggs, young, and adult bed bugs are readily transported in luggage, clothing, bedding, and furniture. Bed bugs can infest airplanes, ships, trains, and buses. Bed bugs are most frequently found in dwellings with a high rate of occupant turnover, such as hotels, motels, hostels, dormitories, shelters, apartment complexes, tenements, and prisons. Such infestations usually are not a reflection of poor hygiene or bad housekeeping.

The ‘New’ Old Threat

What are the risks? As insects go, bed bugs are technically more of a nuisance than a danger, and have not been shown to be capable of transferring disease from person to person. Unfortunately this fact does nothing to reduce the potentially huge negative impact on those affected. Even in cases of minor infestations, people bitten may receive numerous bites over a few nights before they begin to work out what is causing them. Depending on the sensitivity of an individual, the effect of these bites can range from small red dots to large welts that itch and may become irritated and infected when scratched.

How big is the rise? Quantifying this resurgence is difficult, there is no national database where information is stored and individuals and businesses are understandably reluctant to openly share their experiences… Would you stay in a hotel that admitted they had a bed bug problem? The data that is out there does not look good, nationwide; there was a 19% increase in bedbug complaints during an 18-month stretch from summer 2003 to winter 2004, according to a March 2005 survey by Pest Control Technology magazine.

New York has attracted significant attention in recent years and while there is no official tally of bedbug complaints in New York City, pest control experts and scientists say the city is in the midst of a serious outbreak. Tom Nimetz, who has run Better Pest Control Management in Brooklyn for 35 years, said he has been called to more than 500 bed bug jobs in the last two years, up from one or two cases in a year.

New York was also the focus of national media attention in 2003 when a Mexican businessman sued the Helmsley Park Lane Hotel after he and a companion allegedly suffered numerous bed bug bites to their torsos, arms and necks while staying at the property, which overlooks Central Park. Helmsley Enterprises Inc., the owner of the hotel, settled the suit quietly in 2004. Stopping short of confirming bed bugs had been a problem, Howard Rubenstein, a company spokesman, said the hotel had not had any problems with bed bugs since the lawsuit.
The scale of the problem in New York can be further qualified by the efforts of New York City Council member Gale Brewer. In May 2005 Council member Brewer introduced legislation that would represent a major gain in the City's fight against a growing bed bug infestation. In addition to banning the sale of reconditioned mattresses, Brewer's legislation would create a Bed Bug Task Force that would be responsible for monitoring the scope of this dynamic problem and developing the long-term policy solutions needed to curb the spread of this infestation.

"Bed bugs are already a huge threat to New York City residents, and have a real potential to be a menace to the City's economy," said Brewer.

Yes, OK, but what about me? Within the United States pest control companies have reported increasing bed bug activity on a national scale. Orkin, one of North America’s largest and most experienced pest control companies reports having dealt with bed bugs in 47 states and is estimating a 25-30% increase in bed bug infestations over the next four to five years. Even without definitive data on the rise of bed bugs one thing is certain – If your business involves transient people, furniture or accommodations you will have to deal with this problem at some point and probably sooner rather than later.

Do I have them already and how would I know? Even though bed bugs are small, approximately 1/5th of an inch long, about the size of a lady bug, they can be readily seen with the naked eye. They are wingless, oval and flattened in appearance and crawl at a steady rate. They are rusty red or mahogany in color. Nymphs (young) appear identical to the adults except for their smaller size, and a lighter, yellowish white color. Eggs are white and are about 1/32 inch long. Newly hatched bugs are nearly colorless.

Bed bugs are active at night when they leave their daytime resting place in cracks and crevices to seek out human blood.

By checking the bed linen in the middle of the night you have the best opportunity to find bed bugs on the move. Bed bug bites are normally two or three in a row and often blood spots are deposited on the sheeting. Any nearby crack or crevice can serve as a daytime refuge for bed bugs. Look for bed bugs under folds in mattresses, along seams and in between bedposts and bed slats. When large numbers of bed bugs are present, they produce a distinctive pungent odor. Numerous dark fecal spots on linen or near cracks are another indication of a bed bug infestation.

Dealing With ‘Them’

As with most pest issues the goal is to act fast and be thorough. Enlist the services of a reputable pest control professional who has experience dealing specifically with bed bugs. According to Stoy Hedges, B.C.E., Manager of Technical Services for Terminix, “Terminix has seen a significant increase in bed bug calls over the past few years with the bugs now showing up in single family homes. This insect is difficult to control and requires the expertise of an experienced pest control company.” Treatment normally involves the following steps,

1. Complete and thorough inspection of areas suspected of infestation. This should include furniture, bedding, personal belongings, and surrounding structures.
2. Treatment of all infected areas and items.
3. The application of IGR’s (Insect Growth Regulators), which are residual chemicals that help reduce the risk of further infestation.
4. Follow-up inspections and treatment if necessary.

While this procedure seems pretty basic and similar to what you might expect for other insect pests, the difference really comes in when working directly with the customer.
The ‘Gross’ Factor. The ‘gross’ factor is extremely high with this issue. If comments like these are not
enough to convince you, “I'm repulsed, I'm horrified and I'm disgusted,” said a mother of three, who lives in an
upscale building in Jackson Heights, Queens, where bed bugs have spread to 26 apartments, a quick surf on the
world wide web should do it, with high dollar lawsuits being filed more and more frequently.

Policies, Procedures, and Liability Issues

With lawsuits in excess of $20 million having been filed, liability is a major concern. While you may not be
able to stop yourself from being sued you can certainly go a long way to protecting yourself by dealing with any
problems in an educated and consistent manner.

1. Develop and maintain a comprehensive company policy. At a minimum, this policy should clearly outline
   your company’s stance with respect to the problem, training, responsibilities, and customer relations.
2. Develop and maintain concise and well thought out procedures that deal with your most likely scenarios.
   Even though each situation you deal with will be different, knowing what to do in the most common
   situations will give you a baseline.
3. Train your staff! The best policies and procedures mean nothing if they are not common knowledge and
   common practice. Thorough training and strict enforcement sends a strong message to customers and
   employees alike, “we are dealing with this issue and you are part of the solution.