

Bed bug fever

Reports of the bloodsuckers are up – and so is the paranoia

DAKSHANA BASCARAMURTY

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When Ottawan Lisa Vod travelled to Toronto this past weekend, she brought the grubbiest contents of her wardrobe to the hotel: a ripped hoodie, an old sweatshirt and worn-out sweatpants. Before she left, Ms. Vod, a 34-year-old factory worker, knew she'd trash those clothes before she went home. She kept her nice outfits in the car to change into right before she went out on the town.

They may seem like extreme measures, but Ms. Vod has been bitten by the bed-bug hysteria infesting major Canadian cities in recent months.

Last year, Toronto Public Health received 1,500 reports of bed bugs. As of the end of August, they'd already racked up 1,334 reports for 2010, including 258 that month alone.

Rising even faster than the reports is bloodsucker paranoia. Victims trade stories about the lasting psychological effects on online bed-bug forums, those in charitable organizations business have become leery of donations, and people who have had infestations keep mum among friends and colleagues out of fear they'll be stigmatized.

Exterminators and entomologists have floated various theories of why bed bugs – whose numbers had declined in the past few decades only to tick upward recently – are back.

Susan Sperling, a spokeswoman for Toronto Public Health, says their increase could be due to the fact that people are travelling more and taking the critters with them in their suitcases from one city to another. Another reason could be the ban of broad-spectrum residual pesticides – which were found to have other serious negative health effects. A built-up resistance to chemicals could also be to blame, she says.

Ms. Vod researched hotels on TripAdvisor before finding one she hoped was bed-bug free.

'I will inspect the room ... to make sure,' Ms. Vod wrote in an e-mail before she left for Toronto. 'Now because it seems to be all over the news, I'm overstressed.'

Adam Radomsky, an associate psychology professor at Montreal's Concordia University who is completing a three-year body of work on contamination fears, likens bed-bug disgust and discomfort to what happened with SARS and H1N1.

'Things were very narrow in the beginning for those problems. The anxiety, the fear, the panic spread much further and I think it's the same phenomenon happening here.'

Fear can take shape even when there isn't clear evidence of contamination, he says.

'We can feel contaminated thinking about something, remembering something.'

Another problem with bed bugs, says Andrew Keddie, an insect pathologist at the University of Alberta, is that 'as a rule, you don't find them.'

Their shape – they're small, dark and have flattened bodies – make them hard to detect, he says. In many cases the bites are the only evidence of bed-bug presence. They're often flat and itchy and appear in arcs of three on the skin, which are nauseatingly described by some as 'breakfast, lunch and dinner.'

After a sleepless night in her Toronto condo in April, Jessica showed up to work groggy and on edge. When her co-workers asked if she was okay, she broke down into tears and confessed she might have bed bugs.

'They said, 'We're going to support you, but we're not going to touch you or go near you," she recalls.

For Jessica, 26, who did not want her last name used for fear of seeing her property value decline, the pests not only consumed her blood (as evidenced by the bite marks all over her body), but also her thoughts. Could she hug her colleagues? Could she have guests over? Was it okay for her to sleep at a friend's place?

While she'd dealt with her share of cockroach, mice and ant infestations in previous Toronto apartments, the bed bugs affected her the most, she says.

For weeks, even after two visits by an exterminator who sprayed her apartment, she'd come home from work and search every nook and cranny in the house for bed-bug carcasses.

'I just wanted to find evidence, to find proof they were there,' she says.

On websites such as Bedbugger.com, users – cloaked in anonymity – share tales of how their own bed-bug problems affected their sleep and their ability to concentrate at work. Many confess to feeling shame about their infestations and being labelled as unhygienic – despite the fact that even luxury condos and five-star hotels have been sites of infestations.

In Michelle Heath's Winnipeg apartment, there's a light sprinkling of white powder around all the baseboards.

'I look like a cocaine addict,' the 24-year-old office manager says with a laugh. 'I just need to know there's something there.'

A year ago, at her previous residence, Ms. Heath discovered bed bugs just a few weeks after she moved in. Her apartment was sprayed, but it didn't solve the problem, so she found a new place to live.

During the ordeal, she only told her bosses about the problem – and that was just because she needed time off to deal with it. She feared others at the office would treat her differently if they knew.

'I felt like a total freak because I had bed bugs,' she says. 'Do I go to work, do I not go to work?'

While she gets more shut-eye now than she did a year ago – when it was only three or four hours a night – she says thoughts about the bloodsuckers keep her up and have caused her to overthink everything.

'[Bed bugs] poo on your bedding and it's like little black spots. So any time I see a little black spot, nine times out of 10 it's lint or something, but I have to look at it right away and figure out what it is,' she says.

In Toronto, the fact that bed bugs are on the rise has alarmed some non-profit organizations and second-hand merchants, as well.

Red Door Family Shelter, a Toronto charity, stopped accepting donations of upholstered furniture and mattresses this spring because of the city's bed-bug problem. 'We were receiving complaints from our ex-residents who had received [furniture],' Bernnitta Hawkins, the organization's executive director, says.

The cost of testing furniture for bed bugs is so high that it just made more sense to turn down all couches, armchairs and mattresses, putting the onus on residents to use what little money they have to make such purchases themselves.

Ms. Heath trashed her brand-new \$1,000 mattress and all other furniture when she moved to a new apartment, but she still sometimes worries bed bugs may be lurking in various corners of her apartment: hiding in shoes, burrowing under her box spring, scurrying up her bedroom walls at night.

'Even if there hasn't been one, you're totally psychologically like, 'I can feel it! I can feel it!''