



COMMUNIQUE

WHEN THE BED BUGS BITE

Good night. Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite

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Many of us grew up hearing this from our mothers as we crawled into bed at the end of a long day. What we probably did not know was that this children's nursery rhyme dates back to 1881 and actually ends with "But if they do, then take your shoe and hit them til they're black and blue."

Now, as adults, the mere mention of bedbugs can send us into crazy fits of scratching. Clobbering them with a shoe, although fitting as a rhyme, won't actually solve the bedbug dilemma at all as the tiny, asexual creatures can lay up to seven eggs a day, 40 every two weeks. That's why having bedbugs is often referred to as an infestation.

These critters have been tormenting sleepers for thousands of years and have become a common scourge in New York City.

Bedbugs are small insects that feed on blood from humans or animals. They can live in beds, furniture, carpet, clothing, and other belongings. Bedbugs are most active at night, feeding on people as they sleep because it takes them anywhere from three to 10 minutes to get a gobble down a full meal of your blood. Bedbugs are typically no larger than one quarter of an inch. They're flat, oval-shaped, and reddish-brown in color. They rely on animals or humans to carry them from one place to another and are found in virtually every place people tend to gather, including residences, hotels,

schools, offices, retail stores ... and even public transportation.

And that's the problem. Bedbugs can be found any place. There's virtually no way to avoid them. Once they latch onto your warm body, they are your travel buddy.

Bedbugs are not anyone's fault. Major bedbug infestations are occurring everywhere, including the wealthiest neighborhoods, and they have nothing to do with being "dirty." Bedbugs don't care whether your house is totally unkempt or as neat as a pin;

they're only interested in the presence of humans to feed on.

In fact, some of the biggest business names in New York City have had to deal with bedbugs at one time or another, including Niketown,

Google, Bloomingdale's, the Wall Street Journal, Hollister, Victoria's Secret, and even the Empire State Building. In fact, the MTA last year pulled a half dozen city buses off the road because of concern about the blood-suckers being on board.

"Bedbugs can invade a home at any time. It has nothing to do with cleanliness, socioeconomic status, or where you live," said Local 1180 Staff Representative Teesha Foreman. "Bedbugs do not discriminate. They simply attach themselves to any warm environment they can find and then multiply at the speed of light."

Although bedbug bites are rarely dangerous, they can be very itchy, become infected, or cause an allergic reaction. No matter what, City agencies and the union take bedbug problems very seriously as the minuscule insects can cause enormous headaches.

Foreman said that when any City agency hears about a bedbug situation at work, they first clean the area, then relocate the worker to a different location in order to determine the source of the bedbugs. Once identified, the City will ask the worker to arrange for a certified home inspection to locate and eradicate the bedbugs. Given the rapidity with which the bugs reproduce, every day workers put off getting help will only multiply the severity of the problem.

In order for any City employee to be cleared to return to work, they must hire a certified inspection company, which can cost upward of thousands of dollars depending on the severity of the infestation and the size of the residence. The New York City area has more than 1,000 pest control companies and thousands of licensed pest management professionals. However, to get rid of bed bugs, you must choose the right company, be clear about what needs to be done, and monitor the service.

However, workers can contact the New York City Office of Housing and Preservation Development (HPD), which will schedule an inspection free of charge for City residents.

New York City isn't actually the worst place in the country for bedbugs, but it is no. 2, according to the pest control company Terminix, which

released its 2019 report on June 3. Out of the nation's 50 worst cities, the Big Apple was outdone only by Philadelphia. New York City's HPD tracks the numbers of bedbug violations every year, too, and from July 1, 2018, to April 30, 2019, they issued 1,178 violations throughout the five boroughs. According to another report, the highest rates of violations were found in Flatbush, West Harlem, and Morrisania.

Now that you are scratching your way through this article, it's important to know how a professional will deal with bedbugs if you have them.

One of the initial tasks of control is an inspection to locate where the pests are hiding and determine the degree of infestation that in turn determines the treatment protocol.

Most pest management professionals use a combination of treatment methods such as steam heat, freezing, and pesticides, which are selected and applied carefully according to specific circumstances. Treatments may also include strategies to manage pests such as sealing cracks and crevices where they may hide, and modifying windows and doors to prevent pests from entering dwellings. Professional exterminators are trained and licensed in pesticide application to ensure safety of occupants and effectiveness of controlling these pests. Once the inspection has been completed, the exterminator will perform the initial treatment, instruct the occupant on encasing the mattress or removing excessive clutter from the area, and provide instructions about proper laundering of bedding. The exterminator will then return for a follow-up inspection about two to three weeks later and if more bugs are found, will treat the area again.

There are also some exterminating companies that use dogs who are trained specifically to sniff out adult bedbugs and their eggs.

Foreman said that oftentimes those with bedbug situations will put off getting help with a known problem because of the stigma associated with the pesky bugs. However, you might be surprised to know how many other people have bedbugs, or have had them, too.

Once a treatment professional gives the "all clear," City workers will need to submit that written notification to their employer and union prior to being able to return to the job. For some, this could be a matter of weeks; for others, several months, which is why Foreman reiterates the urgency in tackling the problem as quickly as it's discovered.

So how do you know if you even have bedbugs? Your first clue that they might be running rampant in your residence is multiple bites that appear to show and possibly itch. Bedbug bites range from small red pinpricks to large inflamed welts, and often resemble mosquito, spider, or mite bites. Because bedbugs like to cluster together and prefer to stay close to their food source, you may be able to find them in and around a bed they've infested, especially in the seams and tufts of mattresses, in the box spring, around the headboard or footboard, or in the bed's structure. They often leave evidence of their presence where you can see it — tiny, dark-red feces, eggs, dead bedbugs, and the cast-off skins that nymphs leave behind when they grow to a larger size. Bedbugs that have been crushed during the night by a restless sleeper can leave bloodstains on

the sheets. Bed bugs can also hide in electrical switch plates, picture frames, wallpaper,

and nearly anywhere inside a home, car, bus, or other shelter.

"Encountering bedbugs is never a pleasant experience, and there are many unexpected places for them to hide," Foreman said. "The worst thing anyone can do is try to cover up the problem because one way or another it's bound to surface. After all, if you have bedbugs at home and they are on your clothes, you will be bringing them to work. It's

important to make sure that everyone understands there is nothing to be ashamed of as bedbugs do not differentiate between color of your skin, the amount of money in your wallet, or which borough you live in." ■

What To Do & Know If You Find Bedbugs

1. Advise your landlord of the problem, preferably in writing, and keep a copy for your records, along with verification it was mailed
2. Find a certified company and arrange an inspection
3. Call your union rep immediately
4. If you get no response, report the problem using the Bed Bug Complaint Form. You can call 311 to report bedbugs in day care centers, NYC public schools, CUNY colleges, and subways. To report bedbugs in public housing, residents can call the Customer Contact Center at 718.707.7771

For New York tenants, the right to a bedbug-free environment is included in the City's housing and maintenance code, which specifically names bedbugs in the list of insects the landlord is legally obligated to eradicate

5. The NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) lists bedbugs as a Class B violation, which means that they are considered hazardous and the landlord has 30 days to correct the problem. The landlord must eradicate the infestation and keep affected units from getting reinfested

6. If your landlord refuses to take the necessary steps, you can file a complaint with HPD (call 311) or take the owner to Housing Court in an HP action; you can also file a complaint with the NYS Division of Housing and Community Renewal (if you are a rent-regulated tenant)

For More Information on What to do if You Find Bedbugs in Your Home

metcouncilonhousing.org/help_and_answers/bedbugs#answer01

www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/healthtopics/bedbugs.page

