

Bedbug reports increase in Santa Clara County

Pest control worker says ‘cases have more than quadrupled’ in a year

By Sandeep Ravindran

sravindran@mercurynews.com

They come out under cover of the night to suck your blood, which they need to survive. And they can hide in the smallest of cracks, making them incredibly hard to kill.

These tiny blood-sucking parasites are bedbugs, and their numbers have increased dramatically in Santa Clara County over the past few years.

So far, 2011 seems to be continuing the trend, said Jose Colome, vector control community resource specialist for Santa Clara



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County. And with most bedbug cases between July and November, this year's worst may be yet to come.

“There’s definitely been quite a substantial increase just in the past year,” said Don Street, the president of D&J Pest Control in Campbell. “Our cases have more than quadrupled. A lot of apartment complexes used to have problems only with cockroaches, but now it’s bedbugs, too.”

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Bedbugs

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In 2010 Vector Control received 125 calls about possible bedbug infestations, almost double the 65 service requests in 2009, and a huge increase from only eight in 2008, Colome said. About 90 percent of all service requests are positive for bedbugs, he said.

Although bedbugs are considered public health pests, they do not transmit diseases, and there are no mandatory reporting requirements for them. As a result, it's difficult to get an accurate number of bedbug infestations, and the numbers available likely are an underestimate, Colome said.

The Vector Control District doesn't treat bedbug infestations but provides information and free traps to help identify whether an infestation is indeed caused by these parasites. It also provides referrals to pest control services.

Bedbug bites generally cause itchiness and can leave large itchy welts, although they can also cause an allergic reaction in some people. While the response to the bites usually occurs quickly, it can take up to two weeks.

One reason for an increase in bedbug service requests could be increased awareness, Colome said. But bedbug incidents have increased nationwide since the 1990s. Experts attribute the resurgence to greater domestic and international travel, increased pesticide resistance among the bugs, and a decline in effective state and local pest-control programs.

The recession may also have played a role. Couch-surfing, where people sleep on various friends' sofas when they have no home of their own, and reusing discarded furniture and mattresses all make it easier for the bedbugs to get around, Colome said. The tiny bugs can fit in all kinds of spaces, including mattresses, box springs, wall hangings, light fixtures, electrical outlets and baseboards.

"We've pulled off picture frames, and dozens just start to come out," said Street. "They're one of the most difficult bugs to get rid of. I don't know of any pest control agency that guarantees their removal, and follow-up treatments are usually necessary."

Pest control services have to strip the beds, take the bed frame apart and inject insecticides into every crack and crevice they can find. It takes a lot of time and effort, which doesn't come cheap. Typical treatments cost \$400 to \$700, and more expensive methods can cost up to \$5,000.

Most of the service requests come from private residences, although the Vector Control District also received 15 percent of calls from hotels and a few from homeless shelters, Colome said. With people constantly coming and going, homeless shelters are

5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT BEDBUGS

1. Adult bedbugs are about the size of apple seeds and can be seen with the naked eye.
2. Bedbugs can be identified by their sweet, musty odor, and as rusty brown spots on furniture and mattresses.
3. A bedbug population can increase from 40 to 3,000 in just three months in a 70-degree room.
4. It can take up to 14 days to get a reaction to a bedbug bite.
5. If you think you have bedbugs, do not remove anything from the room before inspection or treatment.

Source: California Department of Public Health, Vector-Borne Disease Section

5 WAYS TO PREVENT BEDBUG INFESTATIONS

1. Don't reuse discarded furniture, especially mattresses.
2. Vacuum regularly to remove bedbugs and reduce their numbers.
3. Look for tell-tale signs of bedbugs when going to hotels and residences.
4. Don't leave luggage open on hotel beds, to prevent transmission.
5. Eliminate clutter to make it harder for the bugs to hide.

Source: Santa Clara County Vector Control District

WHOM TO CALL

To confirm whether you have bedbugs and get a referral for pest-control services, contact Santa Clara County Vector Control at 408-918-4770 or www.sccvector.org.

particularly susceptible to the parasites.

Fifty-six-year-old Daniel Miller received his first bedbug bites a few weeks back at the James Boccardo Reception Center, a homeless shelter in San Jose.

"It got so severe, I had bites all over," he said.

Miller said the shelter called pest control and successfully treated the problem, "but I hope they keep tabs on it." Bedbugs were a recurring problem at several Santa Clara County homeless shelters, he said.

But bedbugs aren't picky.

"We've treated homeless shelters, apartments and even million-dollar homes," Street said. To transmit the bugs, "all it takes is one piece of luggage coming back from across the U.S. or the world."

Contact Sandeep Ravindran at 408-271-5064.



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