

DAILY NEWS

Bedbug epidemic attacks New York City

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A bedbug epidemic has exploded in every corner of New York City - striking even upper East Side luxury apartments owned by Gov. Spitzer's father, the Daily News has learned.

The blood-sucking nocturnal creatures have infested a Park Ave. penthouse, an artist's colony in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, a \$25 million Central Park West duplex and a theater on Broadway, according to victims, exterminators and elected officials.

Once linked to flophouses and fleabags, bedbug outbreaks victimize the rich and poor alike and are spreading panic in some of the city's hottest neighborhoods.

"In the last six months, I've treated maternity wards, five-star hotels, movie theaters, taxi garages, investment banks, private schools, white-shoe law firms, Brooklyn apartments in Greenpoint, DUMBO and Cobble Hill, even the chambers of a federal judge," said Jeff Eisenberg, owner of Pest Away Exterminating on the upper West Side.

The numbers are off the charts: In 2004, New Yorkers placed 537 calls to 311 about bedbugs in their homes; the city slapped 82 landlords with bedbug violations, data show.

In the fiscal year that ended in June, 6,889 infestation complaints were logged and 2,008 building owners were hit with summonses.

They must get rid of the pests within 30 days or face possible action in Housing Court, the city Department of Housing, Preservation & Development says.

The scourge has left no section of the city untouched: Complaints and enforcement actions soared in 57 of the 59 community boards.

In the most bedbug-riddled district, Bushwick in Brooklyn, HPD issued 172 violations this year, up from four in 2004; it responded to 476 complaints, up from 47.

Central Harlem chalked up 269 complaints, up from nine. Williamsburg and Greenpoint, home to the city's hippest galleries, racked up 148, up from 11 in 2004. Astoria and Long Island City saw the tally climb to 345 from 41.

Bedbugs come out of the woodwork at night to feed on human blood, biting people in their sleep and leaving large, itchy skin welts that can be painful. They are not believed to carry or transmit diseases.

A surge in global travel and mobility in all socioeconomic classes, combined with less toxic urban pesticides and the banning of DDT created a perfect storm for reviving the critters, which had been virtually dormant since World War II, experts say.

Prolific reproducers and hardy survivors, they can thrive in penthouses, flophouses or any environment where they can locate warm-blooded hosts, said Louis Sorkin, an entomologist at the Museum of Natural History who keeps a colony of 1,000 bedbugs in his office and lets them feed on his arm.

"The female hatches as many as 500 eggs a year, and they can survive for a year and a half without a blood meal," he said. "They're at home in every neighborhood in the city, including Park Ave. and Fifth Ave."

The small, wingless, rust-colored insects hitch rides on clothing, luggage, furniture, bedding, bookbags, even

shoelaces. They've been spotted in cabs and limos, as well as on buses and subways.

Those travel patterns account for the 1,708 verified bedbug cases in 277 public housing projects this year, the city Housing Authority says. The Department of Education has documented another 74 cases, spread across 50 schools.

They even contaminated five or six apartments in the swanky rental tower at 220 E. 72nd St. owned by Bernard Spitzer, the governor's 83-year-old father.

Several tenants described a persistent, if intermittent, infestation on the 15th, 16th and 17th floors.

One resident had to throw away rugs, bedding, curtains, 20 cashmere sweaters, an Armani suit, a couch, a headboard, a night table, a bedframe and an exercise bike. During extermination, he stayed at the Carlyle Hotel.

Spitzer, a prominent developer, said he was unaware of contamination problems in any of his buildings. He referred calls to the managing agent, Rose Associates.

"The company has worked aggressively and proactively to address this issue through ongoing extermination and apartment inspections," a spokesman said.

Spitzer's 28-story building sits atop the six-story home of Marymount Manhattan College, which discovered seven infestations in two residence halls. The problem was under control by October, a spokeswoman said.

City officials say HPD inspectors are increasing enforcement as complaints mushroom and the Health Department is handling education and prevention efforts. It's not more actively involved because its focus is on disease-spreading pests, officials said.

"That's not good enough," said City Councilman Gale Brewer (D-upper West Side.) "It's great that we're not smoking as much, and great that we're not eating trans fats, but we need to focus on bedbugs in the same aggressive manner."

Brewer wants to create a Bedbug Task Force and bar the sale of reconditioned mattresses, which the Bloomberg administration opposes because it "would adversely impact lower-income New Yorkers," a mayoral spokesman said.

I was getting up to 20 bites a night

Tiny bedbugs can take a huge psychological toll on their victims, like Caitlin Heller, a Queens College student whose Jackson Heights apartment was twice infested.

"I was getting 15 to 20 bites a night, and it was driving me crazy," said Heller, who runs Yahoo's Bedbug Support Group where sufferers commiserate. "I suffered mentally. I couldn't sleep at night, and I couldn't focus during the day because I had itchy, painful welts all over my body."

For therapy, Heller (photo inset) started her online support group in January 2006. In eight months, she had 70 members; today there are 555, almost all New Yorkers.

Bedbugs also take a steep financial toll - and can even keep families apart for the holidays, like the Delgados of Woodside in Queens.

Joyce Delgado, an office manager at a midtown firm, and her husband Joseph, who works in the back office of a brokerage house, always went upstate for Thanksgiving to see family in Wappingers Falls. Not this year. They used up all their vacation time battling an infestation in their apartment of 35 years and didn't want to risk contaminating the homes of loved ones.

It all began in September when Joyce Delgado saw a single bedbug on her husband's pillow at 2 a.m. "We threw out everything - a rug, couch, two upholstered chairs, wall-to-wall carpeting, drapes, towels, curtains, bedding - because we thought everything we owned was contaminated," she said. "We checked into the Grand Motor Inn in Maspeth during extermination. All told, we must have spent \$2,000, and we still won't go back into our bedroom. We're living on a makeshift bed in the living room."

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