

[Back to Story](#) - [Help](#)

**YAHOO!** NEWS

**USA TODAY.com**

# Bedbug boom blamed on increased foreign travel

By Tom Vanden Brook, USA TODAY *Fri Dec 2, 7:16 AM ET*

Bedbugs, the houseguests nobody wants, are back in growing numbers across the USA, and booting them from your bunk can be a lengthy, costly process.

Sixty years after near-eradication, the little bloodsuckers are infesting homes and hotels from New York to San Diego. Why the outbreak? Increased world travel and changing pest-control practices.

"The bugs had become a myth," says Richard Cooper, an entomologist who runs a family pest control firm in Lawrenceville, N.J. "They were the monster in the closet. People don't believe they're real."

They're real, all right. If they've gained a toehold - or wherever they find bare skin to bite - they won't leave your house unless you unleash an all-out effort.

"If you don't manage them, they'll manage you," says Richard Pollack, a researcher at the Harvard School of Public Health.

The re-emergence of bedbugs appears to have begun in the late 1990s. Cooper saw his first one in a motel in 1999.

That prompted him to start collecting reports from colleagues. From June 2000 until May 2001, Cooper surveyed exterminators in the Northeast, Florida and California. None reported more than 22 bedbug calls. In 2004-05, bedbug complaints jumped to 335 in the Northeast, 285 in Florida and 240 in California.

"Now, we're out there dealing with bedbugs every day of the week, all day long," Cooper says.

Cindy Mannes of the National Pest Management Association says the pest control company Orkin has had bedbug reports this year in every state except seven: Alaska, Idaho, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota and Wyoming.

You might expect that the vermin would be found in cut-rate flophouses. You'd be wrong. The Helmsley Park Lane Hotel in New York, where a one-bedroom suite fetches \$950 a night, was sued by a bedbug "bitee" in 2003. The suit was settled, says spokesman Howard Rubenstein, and the hotel has not had a problem since.

In San Diego, Herb Field, an entomologist with Lloyd Pest Control, has treated everything from small condos to rescue missions.

"Five years ago, we might have had a dozen calls for bedbugs a year," he says. "Now we get that many in a week."

Pest control companies blame the bedbug boom on increased foreign travel, Mannes says. The bugs are more common abroad, and they'll happily hitch a ride in a suitcase. The 46 million travelers landing in the USA in 2004 were an increase of almost 12% from 2003, according to the Travel Industry Association of America.

Bedbugs are hardy, too, capable of surviving a year between meals. Those meals consist entirely of blood. Fortunately, they don't appear to spread disease, Pollack says.

There's speculation that the industry trend away from spraying pesticides on baseboards has been a boon for bedbugs, he says. The practice has mostly been discontinued in favor of more targeted, less-toxic alternatives.

Whatever the reason, you may not realize you're living with bedbugs until your home is infested.

"If you wake up at 2 a.m. and something's sucking on your ankle, that's a pretty good sign," Pollack says. "But people generally don't see that, and they don't feel feeding. They're stealthy."

Bedbugs had been feasting on Brian Kayen for some time before he discovered his West Orange, N.J., apartment was infested a year ago.

At first, he thought his laundry detergent had caused him to break out in red welts. Kayen, 26, lived on the second floor of a three-family building, and the

bedbugs apparently had entered a neighbor's home on secondhand furniture.

"I'd get up in the middle of the night and flip the lights on looking for them," he says. Despite four visits by an exterminator, the bedbugs refused eviction. It was Kayen who moved to a new place.

Killing them is tough work, Cooper says. For starters, they're hard to find. They come out only at night, they're translucent until they fill up with blood, and hatchlings are so small they can pass through a stitch-hole in a mattress. Even as full-grown adults, they're only a quarter of an inch long, and their flat bodies allow them to slip into tiny cracks in furniture.

Pollack says a good exterminator will spend at least a half-hour examining furniture, baseboards and mattresses. Several follow-up visits are required, too.

"It can cost thousands of dollars to get rid of them," he says.

Getting rid of them can require pesticides, powerful vacuums and sealing mattresses with impervious covers, Cooper says.

To avoid bringing bedbugs into your home, Pollack says, avoid secondhand furniture.

He says, "You might be getting friends along with that mattress, bed frame or dresser."

Copyright © 2005 [USA TODAY](#), a division of [Gannett Co. Inc.](#)

Copyright © 2005 Yahoo! Inc. All rights reserved.

[Questions or Comments](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) - [Terms of Service](#) - [Copyright/IP Policy](#) - [Ad Feedback](#)