

# Bed bug infestations are hard to track

By KATE BAXTER, STAFF WRITER

While bed bug infestations are on the rise across the country, tracking outbreaks can be a real head scratcher, health officials said.

That's because cases are largely under reported, according to Scott Schermerhorn, environmental health supervisor for the Charlotte County Health Department.

There have been no sizable increases in reports of bed bug infestations in Charlotte County this summer, Schermerhorn said. However, officials are on alert after pest control companies in other Southwest Florida counties, including Collier, reported a spike in calls on the bloodsucking insects.

The best barometer in these kind of infestations often is through pest control businesses, Schermerhorn said. "Businesses, like hotels, will try to keep infestations as quiet as possible," he said. But, Schermerhorn said, they'll still hire someone to get rid of bed bugs, which are found in environments with high turnovers and occupancies, such as hotels, college dormitories and prisons.

Some pest treatment business owners, however, said homeowners often have a similar mindset. They also want to keep an infestation quiet and will sometimes try to tackle the bed bugs on their own.

People often think they can get rid of bed bugs with household pesticides or products, said Jeff Ahrens, owner of Ant-Ser Termite and Pest Control based in Port Charlotte.

Ahrens, a certified entomologist, said 90 percent of all bed bug calls his company fields start with callers saying they first tried to kill bed bugs in their home themselves.

They soon realize, however, that it's best to leave it to the experts, he added.

According to the National Pest Management Association, 95 percent of professional companies have encountered bed bug infestations in the past year. That figure was just 25 percent before 2000, according to a report.

Schermerhorn said the general increase of bed bugs across the country is mostly attributed to the governmental restriction of DDT, a strong pesticide that was banned in the 1970s.

Bed bugs are a difficult pest to treat for a regular homeowner.

"It's not a bug that you can trap or put out a little stick pad for," Schermerhorn pointed out.

Bed bugs, which are about a quarter-inch long, dine on warmblooded animals, primarily humans. Their bites can cause red welts, which if scratched, can lead to infections.

However, no diseases are passed by bed bugs, according to Charlotte County Health officials.

Ahrens, whose customer base includes Charlotte, Lee and Sarasota counties, said while the number of calls in Charlotte County have been unchanged, the number of calls in Sarasota County has increased noticeably.

He attributes the bump to the higher number of vacationers coming into and going out of Sarasota County.

Bed bugs are directly tied to travel or travelers who are exposed to environments such as hotels and resorts, Ahrens said.

"It's why we see a spike in certain seasons," he said. "It's going to explode pretty soon."

Schermerhorn agreed.

"We're not in season yet," Schermerhorn pointed out. "It's possible once we do hit September, October that we may see an increase with travelers."

Suzanne Graham, owner of American Pest Control Management, said there has been no significant increase in the number of bed bug calls for her company, which reaches from Tampa to Naples.

The best way to protect yourself from bed bugs is taking proactive measures when you travel and keeping homes clean and clutter free, she said.

E-mail: kbaxter@sun-herald.com