

PATIENT MONEY

Sleeping With the Enemy (Bed Bugs)



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Roscoe, a bug-sniffing beagle, at work in a home in Hoboken, N.J.

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AFTER virtually disappearing for decades, bed bugs have made a comeback throughout the nation, with particularly bad infestations in densely populated apartment buildings.

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Roscoe with his handler, Pete Mattiace.

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Bed bugs, the size of apple seeds, are hard to detect, but a well-trained dog can find them.

Encouraged in part by the banning of DDT, the insects have become so prevalent that the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) held a National Bed Bug Summit in April.

Rather than wait for a Washington task force to do something, though, people with an infestation probably want to take immediate action. So this column is all about what consumers can do to avoid being bitten twice — first by the vermin and then by a venal exterminator.

While in most cases an infestation is more a skin-crawling nuisance than serious [health problem](#), in some people severe reactions to bed bug bites can include [asthma](#), generalized [hives](#) and even a life-threatening allergy attack that requires emergency treatment. Regardless of the medical consequences, though, bed bugs can be expensive to banish.

It's not unusual for the typical afflicted family to spend \$5,000 or more on inspections, exterminator fees, cleaning and storage, according to Jody L. Gangloff-Kaufmann, an urban entomologist with the New York State Integrated Pest Management program at [Cornell University](#). Landlords of large apartment buildings have been known to spend as much as \$80,000 to get rid of the pests, she said.

The insects, which are about the size of an apple seed and resemble [ticks](#), are hard to detect and even harder to kill. The most successful efforts include a combination of a thorough cleaning and sorting, along with repeated professional applications of [pesticides](#) and other bed bug treatments.

But the bed bug boom has attracted fraudulent exterminators peddling money-[wasting](#) treatments that do not work. And because even reputable exterminators charge a wide range in prices and offer a variety of services, it can be hard to know what's worth the money and what's hype.

Here, then, is some calm advice from experts on what you can expect to spend and what you should — and shouldn't — pay for.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM Simply determining whether you have bed bugs can cost you money.

Small and nocturnal, the insects are hard to spot. They love to hide in mattresses and box springs, of course, but they also burrow in woodwork, night tables, picture frames, cushions and even behind outlet and light-switch covers. They come out only to feed on sleeping humans.

The most common way people discover they have bed bugs is when they wake up with bites. But only about a third of people react to bed bug bites, and many of those who do have reactions mistake them for mosquito bites. You may also get the same kind of bites from bird mites, says Gil Bloom, who is vice president of Standard Pest Management, an exterminating company in Queens, and director of public affairs for the New York State Pest Management Association. You can sometimes detect other evidence

like bed bug feces, which look like tiny black specks, or blood stains from a bug that has just had a full meal.

If you suspect bed bugs, you'll probably need a visual inspection from an exterminator to make sure. Many pest control companies do this free, hoping that if you have the bugs, you'll hire them to do removal. Other companies may charge \$50 to \$200 to do a visual inspection.

Some companies use specially trained dogs that can sniff out bed bugs and their eggs. Well-trained dogs can be amazingly accurate, letting you know exactly where the bugs are so you can concentrate your efforts in those problem areas, says Jennifer Erdogan of Bell Environmental Services, a pest control company in Parsipanny, N.J., that uses two trained dogs, including Roscoe, a bug-sniffing beagle.

But the dogs' services are expensive. You'll pay \$300 to \$600 for a home inspection. If you go this route, ask about the dog's credentials. You want to hear that the animal was trained at a certified facility that prepares dogs for jobs that include bomb and drug sniffing. FINDING AN EXTERMINATOR Counterintuitive as it may sound, you probably want to steer clear of pest control companies that emphasize their bed bug expertise. These may be one-person outfits or unqualified shops that have popped up in response to the epidemic.

Ms. Gangloff-Kaufmann advises finding an established company that has been in business at least five years and routinely battles all types of pests, including bed bugs.

Exterminators charge \$250 to \$900 a room to get rid of bed bugs, depending on the level of infestation and the types of treatments used. Some companies may charge by the bed if there are multiple people sleeping in the same room. Most exterminators use a combination of pesticides and steam heat.

Exposure to high temperatures is the only sure way to kill bed bugs, Ms. Gangloff-Kaufmann said. Cryonite, a freezing agent that kills bed bugs on

contact, can add considerably to the cost of an exterminator visit, she said, and isn't 100 percent effective against bed bugs.

Whatever an exterminator uses, it must directly contact a bed bug to kill it. Pesticides have no residual effect on bed bugs. That's why you or your exterminator should never use bug bombs or foggers, which are completely ineffective with bed bugs.

Be sure your exterminator makes at least one follow-up visit. It's virtually impossible to kill all the bugs in a given area with one treatment. Ask if any repeat treatments are included in the price quoted to you.

Check to see that the company you hire and the technician who is coming to your home are licensed in your state. To find your state's licensing agency, check with the National Pesticide Information Center's Web site, <http://npic.orst.edu/state1.htm>.

Also check the Better Business Bureau for any complaints filed against the exterminators you are considering.

ENCASE YOUR MATTRESS All bed bug experts agree that you must encase your mattress and box spring with a durable, leak-proof cover that will trap existing bugs inside the bedding and prevent new bugs from entering. (Even if you don't currently suspect bed bugs, you might want to do this preventively, if you live in a highly infested area.)

The best covers are made from tightly woven cloth and have enclosed zippers and zipper locks to ensure there are no openings anywhere on the covering. A good cover will cost \$70 to \$150, depending on the size of your bed. Don't bother with cheaper covers made of vinyl, which is uncomfortable to sleep on and is likely to crack and tear over time.

BEFORE YOU TOSS ... Often, the first response to bed bugs is to throw stuff out. But replacing contaminated furniture, clothes and other possessions can be one of the biggest unnecessary bed bug expenses.

“Nothing kills bed bugs and their eggs better than high temperatures,” said Mr. Bloom, “so the dryer is your new best friend.”

Bedding, clothes, stuffed animals, backpacks and anything else you can fit into the clothes dryer can be decontaminated by 20 minutes on the high setting. Carry the items to the dryer in a cloth laundry bag that you can throw into the machine. If you use a plastic bag, discard it immediately; bed bugs or eggs might be lurking.

For items that can't go in the dryer, consider packing them in plastic bins or bags and storing them for a year to make sure any hidden insects die.

For furniture and other large items, you may want to consider a professional fumigation service that will decontaminate the items away from your home and return them within a week or so. This can easily add \$1,000 to your bed bug bill. But for antiques, heirlooms and other hard-to-replace items, it may well be worth the cost.