

"Don't let the bedbugs bite!"

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In Brief

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WHEN I WAS A CHILD, my father would send my three sisters and me off to bed with those words, after a kiss and an "I love you." We were amused and never thought anything of it. Now as an adult working in a facility that provides care for individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities, I don't find it quite so amusing.

Several weeks ago a resident we care for had several bites on her torso above the waist and all over her arms. Checking her bed, we were shocked to find several tiny bugs that varied in size from a poppy seed to an apple seed. As per facility protocol, we bagged the bugs and visited our local exterminator. We were dismayed to learn that they were, in fact, bedbugs.

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Finding the culprits

So the search began. We were told that bedbugs have become a national epidemic and that they're not necessarily the product of an unclean environment. Instead, they're passed on in people's clothing and in luggage. We Googled and read and researched. The staff panicked, as most people do when they hear the word *bedbugs*, concerned about infesting their own homes. We cleaned and scrubbed and vacuumed and washed and bagged clothing. We diligently worked on a new policy to deal with the situation.

All clothing was washed in hot water and dried in a hot dryer. Nonwashable items were sealed in plastic bags. Biodegradable bags were purchased to allow staff to bag clothing once and drop them right into the washing machine. Every nook and cranny was vacuumed and scrubbed. Each time a bug was found, the cleaning and vacuuming was redone.¹ The exterminators told us we could expect to find stragglers for 4 to 5 weeks after fumigation.

Letters were sent to the guardians and parents of all residents in the home, and we developed a fact sheet about bedbugs that we made available to all staff, residents, and visitors. We reviewed the information with the exterminators to ensure that all information was accurate. The family of the resident who had bedbug bites was notified by the nurse and the program specialist. She was treated by the agency's medical director.

Fortunately, bedbugs don't spread disease with their bites, but bites can be terribly itchy and tend to occur in lines or groups. The bites generally occur above the waist as bedbugs are attracted by the carbon dioxide we exhale.²

Return of the bedbugs

The facility had been fumigated, the policy created, the staff educated, and the guardians notified. We felt as though we'd made a lot of headway, so we were shocked when the same resident experienced additional bites. This time, the resident's guardians weren't quite as accepting of this matter as they'd been originally.

We repeated the cleaning process. Three additional bugs were found in the resident's bed. We were scheduled to have the house fumigated an additional time based on the exterminator's recommendations and hoped this would deal with the culprits once and for all. A few days passed and all was quiet.

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Mystery solved

Then it happened again. This time the resident had 15 new bites. We were dumbfounded. We couldn't imagine where the bugs were coming from. Then one of the supervisors mentioned the resident's new wheelchair with a cushion, which had been manufactured in Asia. The resident had been in her chair when the house was fumigated. It was sprayed but it wasn't disassembled and thoroughly cleaned. When the cushion was removed from the wheelchair, dozens of bedbugs came crawling out.

Finally, we found the culprit and the locus of the problem. We had the house fumigated once more and had the exterminator take the wheelchair and disassemble it for thorough cleaning and debugging. The cushion for the wheelchair was replaced.

The facility has returned to normal after what was a harrowing experience. We've changed our routines. When we purchase or receive a piece of equipment, we thoroughly examine the product to ensure it isn't bringing any unwanted guests with it. We have weekly bed checks, use light-colored sheets exclusively to make visualizing any bugs easier, and place mattress and boxspring covers that block bedbugs on all of our beds. Needless to say, when most of us travel somewhere, the first thing we do when we get to the hotel—no matter how many stars it's rated—is check the beds for bedbugs!

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