

Scores got sick, 1 died trying to kill bedbugs

September 22 2011, By MIKE STOBBE , AP Medical Writer



FILE - In this Wednesday, March 30, 2011 file photo, a bed bug is displayed at the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History in Washington. A government study counted one death and 80 illnesses linked to bedbug-targeting insecticides used from 2008 through 2010. Many were do-it-yourselfers who misused the chemicals or used the wrong product. Most of the cases were in New York City, the apparent epicenter of a recent U.S. bedbug comeback. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster, File)

(AP) -- Worried about bedbugs? Maybe you should be more concerned about the insecticides used to get rid of them.

A [government study](#) counted one death and 80 illnesses linked to bedbug insecticides over three years. Many were do-it-yourselfers who misused the chemicals or used the wrong product. And most of the cases were in New York City.

The study released Thursday by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) is the first to look at the issue.

The CDC was able to only get data from seven states, including New York, where [bedbugs](#) have become a highly publicized problem and where [health officials](#) have also been extra vigilant about unusual chemical [poisonings](#).

Investigators said they didn't know what to expect, but were relieved to see a relatively small number of cases.

"At this point, it's not a major public health problem," said Dr. Geoff Calvert, a CDC investigator who co-authored the study.

Bedbugs are wingless, reddish-brown insects that bite people and animals to draw blood for their meals. Though their bites can cause itching, they have not been known to spread disease.

"There's nothing inherently dangerous about bedbugs," said Dr. Susi Vassallo, an [emergency medicine](#) doctor who works at New York City's Bellevue Hospital Center and occasionally deals with patients talking about bedbugs.

Vassallo, who is also a toxicologist, said most of the insecticides used against bedbugs are not a health risk but should still be applied by a trained exterminator.

The CDC looked at reports from California, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, New York, Texas and Washington, the only states that tracked such illnesses. The study counted 111 cases in the years 2003 through 2010. Most occurred in the last few years, when bedbug reports rose across the country. More than half were in New York City.

Most were people with headaches or dizziness, [breathing problems](#) or nausea and vomiting.

The one death in 2010 was a 65-year-old woman from Rocky Mount, N.C., who had a history of heart trouble and other ailments. She and her husband used nine cans of insecticide fogger one day, then the same amount two days later, without opening doors and windows to air out their home afterward. She also covered her body and hair with another bedbug product, and covered her hair with a plastic cap.

CDC officials said it's not clear that the insecticides were a definite cause of illness in each of the cases, and it's possible some were coincidental.

About 90 percent of the cases were linked to pyrethroids or pyrethrins, common [insecticides](#) sometimes used against bedbugs. But in some cases, an incorrect and more dangerous product was used. That happened in Ohio last year, when an uncertified exterminator used malathion - which should never be used indoors - to rid an apartment of bedbugs. A couple and their 6-year-old child got sick.

The report was released through a CDC publication, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

More information: CDC report: <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr>

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