

**ATLANTA (Reuters) - The quaint bedtime saying "sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite" has become a grim mission statement for even the finest hotels in the United States amid a resurgence of the tiny bloodsucking pests.**

Rising complaints about these unwelcome guests that bite in the night are leading to red faces at reception desks and an increase in the number of help calls, according to pest control firms and entomologists.

Hotels battling infestations typically request discreet and immediate service, and for good reason. Even though they don't pose a health threat, bed bugs, which live off human blood, can take a nasty bite out of a hotel's reputation and business.

"If a facility is known to have bedbugs, it certainly is going to cut into their client base," said Frank Meek, technical director of Orkin Inc., a pest control firm that saw a 20 percent jump in bed bug-related calls in 2004.

Many came from the hospitality industry.

Concerns about the wingless insects are such that the Atlanta-based firm, a unit of Rollins Inc., will soon begin offering hotels and motels as well as private homes a preventive treatment that it says will ensure a bed bug-free environment for one year.

Besides embarrassing hotel managers and leaving guests itchy and squeamish, bed bugs can trigger lawsuits. A number of companies have been sued by guests who complained of being bitten by the insects.

Even upscale hotels are not immune to litigation, and bug specialists say the pests can thrive even in a spotlessly clean room.

In 2003, a Mexican businessmen sued the Helmsley Park Lane Hotel in New York after he and a companion allegedly suffered numerous bedbug bites to their torsos, arms and necks while staying at the property, which overlooks Central Park.

Helmsley Enterprises Inc., the owner of the hotel, settled the suit quietly last year. Stopping short of confirming bed bugs had been a problem, Howard Rubenstein, a company spokesman, said the hotel had not had any problems with bed bugs since the lawsuit.

### **A resilient foe**

Although bed bugs can prosper in almost any type of building, hotels and motels are particularly vulnerable because of the transient nature of their clients and the ease with which the insects travel in luggage, clothing and furniture.

Oval-shaped and less than a quarter of an inch long, the brown-colored insects like to settle close to their food source, often hiding out under mattresses and bed frames, in crevices and behind picture frames.

Once attached to a sleeping human, they use a barbed proboscis to bore through the skin and suck their blood meal. They can go months without feeding, patiently awaiting a new host or travel companion.

Tamara Shipley became both in 2003. The 38-year-old business consultant discovered that her Atlanta home had become infested shortly after she returned from business trips to Miami and New York and believes the bed bugs came home in her luggage.

"I know for certain that I got them in a hotel, and I stay in nice hotels," said Shipley, who was bitten extensively in her bed for two weeks. "They just don't walk into your house. You bring them in from somewhere else."

### **A disease threat?**

Entomologists are not sure what has caused the recent surge in bed bugs. Some believe it is linked to a reduction in the use of powerful pesticides that once kept the insects at bay.

Although common in many countries, bed bugs were all but eliminated in America in the late 1940s and 1950s when the insecticide DDT was used to rid infestations in hotels, houses and boarding rooms.

DDT was banned in the 1960s for environmental reasons.

More recent changes in the way pest control is conducted also may have played a role in the bed bug's return.

Unlike in the past, when exterminators used products and methods designed to kill a broad spectrum of insects -- cockroaches, bedbugs and ants for instance -- today's pest controller is more likely to target one particular species.

The result is that other pests often survive.

Although divided over why bed bugs are thriving, experts agree that the insects are not a public health threat.

Unlike mosquitoes, which can transmit malaria, yellow fever and West Nile virus, bed bugs have not been linked to anything more serious than the itchy, red welts that often appear on a victim's skin.

"There are no studies that have been done that show they vector anything," said Bill Brogdon, an entomologist with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Hepatitis B has been specifically looked for and the studies have been negative so far."

But that is cold comfort to Shipley and the growing number of hotel guests who are finding that a chocolate mint is not the only surprise awaiting them in their beds. "It

really freaked me out to know I got it in a hotel. It's not something you think about," she said.