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# Responsible control of public health pests is essential during the COVID-19 response

*By Joseph Latino*

With stay-at-home orders still in place in many states, and many senior living communities closed to the general public, public health structural pests such as bedbugs, roaches and rodents are proliferating because of increased accessibility to their preferred food sources. All of these contribute to worsening allergic asthma symptoms and related breathing complications, which may lead to more severe cases of COVID-19 in older adults, who have a mortality rate five times younger people with asthma.

Although pest control has been deemed an essential service by Homeland Security and the vast majority of states during the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns over maintaining social distancing and possible exposure to the coronavirus has significantly slowed, or stopped, treatments for these internal structural pests. This has created a fertile breeding ground for bedbugs, roaches and rodents, especially in senior living environs.

There is a need to strike the “right” balance between preserving public health through preventive and focused pest control and not causing undue exposure risk to senior living residents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Bedbugs**

Bedbugs require frequent blood meals to grow into adulthood and reproduce. Within several months, one pregnant female can result in more than 30,000 bedbugs. If left unaddressed, bedbugs will spread throughout a community, affecting the lives of all co-residents.

Bedbugs also prefer to feed while being undisturbed — for example, when people are sleeping or resting for extended periods on a couch, and while watching TV. Stay-at-home social behavior has provided plenty of opportunities for bedbugs to feed. Sadly, those affected by the coronavirus who are too sick to get out of bed provide the ideal bedbug victim. Resulting bites, when repeatedly scratched, can lead to infections that further complicate the condition of the person.

## **So what can you do?**

As senior living communities enhance their disinfection efforts, consider including building-wide bedbug detection and treatment wherever necessary and instituting preventive strategies. Taking proactive steps now to prevent bedbugs will improve the quality of life for residents and staff members and create great savings down the road.

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## *Responsible control of public health pests continued*

### **Rodents and roaches**

Rodent activity is on the uptick throughout the country. Increased food storage, food waste and delayed garbage removal provide ample food sources for these pests to grow quickly in number. National experts in the control of rodents note that, as quarantines continue and restaurants remain closed in some areas, rodent activity is likely to rise in many environments, including senior housing. For the same reasons, the frequency of roach infestations are increasing. Untreated, in three to four months, a roach population can multiply by more than 600 times and will continue to expand exponentially without periodic pest control maintenance and proper cleaning procedures.

### **Solution**

Delaying treatment and the implementation of preventive programs has created an explosion of infestations, which dangerously increases the levels of allergens for residents subject to asthma and related allergies, increasing health problems, psychological distress and disruptions caused by these pests.

If pest management professionals are not engaged to control these public health pests, then some residents may resort to “do-it-yourself” pest control, including the improper use of household chemicals that are ineffective and often dangerous. Many of these chemicals are highly flammable and can compromise those with breathing difficulties, and some treatments actually may enhance the resistance of these pests to traditional chemical treatments, making treatment less effective and more time-consuming.

In trying to control the delicate balance between the short-term needs of preventing the spread of COVID-19 and securing public safety through responsible pest control, the unintended hazards of deferring treatments for public health pests must be recognized. Even in the short- and medium term, adopting preventive strategies now, using well-documented integrated pest management-based protocols, will reduce the need for contact time between residents and pest management service providers by 50% to 65%.

And let's remember, pest management professionals are just that, professionals. Using well-established COVID-19 hygiene guidelines to treat senior living communities while implementing preventive programs will significantly reduce the problems caused by these public health pests.

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