10 things you should know about cockroaches

Source: Zach DeVries, UK assistant professor of urban entomology

Cockroaches are one of the most common pests to infest homes and apartments. They get into homes by hitching a ride on items such as grocery bags, food cartons and furniture and by using their flat, brownish bodies to slip in through crevices and cracks in buildings. While large cockroaches may seem the most frightening, it is the smaller ones that pose the biggest concern to human health.

Here are 10 things you should know about cockroaches:

1. **Roommates.** Cockroaches and humans have lived together for thousands of years, and it is unlikely to change any time soon.
2. **There are more than 4,500 species of cockroaches.** However, only a handful cause problems to humans. The most troublesome is the German cockroach, which is only about 0.5 inches long and is the one most commonly found indoors.
3. **Cockroaches make great pets.** The Madagascar hissing cockroach is a large cockroach that makes a wonderful pet. They are easy to maintain, quiet, do not pose a threat to human health and don’t take up much space.
4. **Scavengers**. Cockroaches LOVE any and all food. They will feed on whatever they can find including human food and pet food. They love to hide in warm, moist areas and are attracted to places with poor sanitation practices and food preparation areas. Bathrooms and kitchens are their favorite hiding spots.
5. **Two main groups.** Cockroaches are generally grouped based on if they live inside or outside of the home. The species that live outside are often larger (e.g., American Cockroach), while the indoor species tend to be smaller (e.g., German cockroach). While the larger roaches can be more frightening to people, the smaller species cause most of the human health problems.
6. **Health importance-disease transmission.** Due to their ability to easily move between food/food preparation surfaces and waste bins, cockroaches can easily spread many diseases including leprosy, salmonella, dysentery, E. coli, urinary tract infections, tuberculosis and pneumonia.
7. **Health importance-allergies and asthma.** Cockroaches produce a suite of potent allergens to which many people are sensitive. These allergens can lead to the development of asthma and cause asthma attacks when not properly mitigated. About a quarter of the population is allergic to cockroaches.
8. **Cockroach management is tricky**. Since they are mostly nocturnal, you may not see cockroaches until a significant infestation exists. However, it is possible to eliminate cockroaches with proper identification and use of the correct products. Commercially available cockroach baits are very effective at controlling the pests, but it is often best to call a pest control professional.
9. **Early detection makes management easier**. Knowing the preferred locations of where cockroaches like to hide; warm, dark, moist areas, especially in kitchens and bathrooms, will help in early detection. Often one of the first places you will find them is around and behind the refrigerator.
10. **Sanitation is important.** Since they are scavengers, if there isn’t enough food for them to eat then they will be easier to control. You can reduce your risk of getting cockroaches by keeping food in secure containers, cleaning up immediately after meals and picking up pet food.

More information about cockroaches is available in the University of Kentucky Department of Entomology’s ENTFACT 614. It is available online at <https://entomology.ca.uky.edu/ef614> or by contacting the (COUNTY NAME) office of the UK Cooperative Extension Service.

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