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**What lies beneath?**

**How clean is your hotel bed? Paul Miles and his team of experts go undercover to find out.**  
 (Filed: 02/11/2004)

How many people have you shared your hotel bed with? I'm not asking you to give away any secrets - but to reflect, for a moment, on the number of bodies that have slept - and will sleep - in each and every hotel bed.



**Sleep tight: some hotel beds are cleaner than others**

Perhaps it's not something you care to think about too closely, but it is a subject that frequently exercises Bruce King of The Mattress Doctor, a pioneering mattress-cleaning company.

King says that at a busy airport hotel, where the average stay is one night and beds are replaced every eight years - as recommended by the bed industry - there could be the dead skin cells and accompanying bacteria and viruses from more than 2,000 people in your mattress. Not to mention millions of dust mites. It's not a pleasant thought, is it?

And yet hotels claim to take their beds very seriously; they invest significant amounts of money in them and use them as a major selling point. Sheraton recently introduced a Sweet Sleeper Bed - available to purchase for £1,250 - on which the hotel group "guarantees" guests a good night's sleep.

Westin hotels have the new Heavenly Bed, Hyatt the Grand Bed, and Marriott the New Bed. Four Seasons beds are so comfortable that guests frequently ask to buy them, and from next year, the Von Essen hotel group will be offering its handmade beds for sale at about £5,000 each.

But while hotels are happy to draw our attention to the quality of their beds, they don't want us to think about the other 1,999 people who will be sleeping in them. Their

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marketing departments may bang on about the thread count of their bed linen, but when was the last time you heard a hotel boasting about how often it cleans its mattresses? Does it go without saying that they do? Or must we assume that they don't?

To find out, I went to inspect the mattresses in six London hotels with two experts -Bruce King and Jessica Alexander of The Sleep Council, a non-profit organisation funded by 40 bed manufacturers that advises consumers and, occasionally, the tourism industry, on beds. What we found was disturbing.

Jessica Alexander and I checked in to our £130 room at the Sheraton Heathrow and set to work. The hotel group's new bed is certainly luxurious. Bed linen is combed cotton percale with a high 200-thread count; two pillows were in duck down and feather, two in synthetic fibre.

"It's obviously brand new," said Alexander, balancing a fat pillow across her arm to check it didn't "flop". We pulled the sheets and mattress cover off.

"It's a new mattress, too, with a quilted top, rather than 'tufts' (buttons) - a good idea for hotels." The mattress was pocket sprung with a good layer of filling on top. Alexander declared the 6ft-wide bed "everything you would expect for a room of this quality."

Then it was Bruce King's turn. He unveiled his vacuum cleaner, which not only vacuums but vibrates - "essential to break up the crust of dust mixed with dried sweat," explained King. "An adult can sweat up to a pint and a quarter a night."

A quick, 30-second vacuuming resulted in a sample of grey-white dust. "It's not a brand new mattress after all," he declared, examining the dirt, trapped on a black cloth. He then performed an allergen test. The dust proved "mild" for the protease enzyme found in dust-mite faeces, which can cause asthma attacks.

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### What lies beneath? (continued)

**How clean is your hotel bed? Paul Miles and his team of experts go undercover and find stained mattresses, grubby duvets and mountains of dust.**

(Filed: 02/11/2004)

A further five minutes' vacuuming resulted in less than a tea-bag's worth of dust and fluff, which King said was "very little" - not surprising when it transpired that the bed was only two months old.



But, as King explained, the amount of dust produced from a mattress depends on many factors. Poorer-quality mattresses "puff" out dust during the night as people move. Better-quality mattresses retain dust in the filling.

Our tour of five other London hotels was more of an eye-opener. At the Corus, Hyde Park, King deemed the mattress in the £119 standard room "filthy". Five minutes' vacuuming resulted in piles of greasy grey dust.

Mattress-turning instructions revealed that it was the wrong way up for August. Dust-mite allergen levels were "medium to high". It was also uncomfortable, with every spring making its presence felt. The only good thing was that the divan had a "firm-edge base", which, said Alexander, "is good for hotels, where people sit on the edge of the bed."

Richard Davis, a spokesman from the Corus, commented: "Mattresses are checked daily and replaced every four years, or as soon as they are damaged. We don't receive any complaints; however, we will review our procedures about mattress maintainance."

At the Best Western Delmere, we were told that we couldn't check in to the £112 room as it had just been treated for bed bugs. On seeing our shocked expressions, the receptionist explained that it was a routine six-monthly preventative treatment by Rentokil, and reassured us that

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none had been found. We went for lunch and came back later.

After our visit to inspect the bed, including a mattress still damp from (toxic) spray, the receptionist was rather embarrassed to learn who we were, especially as it transpired he was the general manager. Still, apart from the dampness, the bed was good. The duck feather and down pillows were "quite plumptious," declared Alexander.

The mattress was "obviously cleaned regularly," said King. Dust-mite allergen was "towards the middle range". We found the mattress very comfortable and I wasn't surprised to learn from Alexander that the brand, Kingcoil, is endorsed by the American Association of Chiropractors.

Although no bed bugs were found at the Best Western Delmere, Tony Stephens, an entomologist with Rentokil, said that across the country, from halls of residences to five-star hotels, incidences of these blood-sucking bugs are "on the increase".

Stephens suggested that a combination of factors could be to blame: more foreign travel, meaning people bring bugs back in their luggage, and greater use of fitted furniture. Bed bugs don't live on or in mattresses, but in nooks and crannies nearby. Fitted furniture has lots of hide-holes from where it's difficult to eradicate the bugs, which are easily visible to the naked eye. Their bites can cause painful, itchy swellings.

Our tour had now reached Paddington station, where we hunted for a budget hotel. The door of the Burgundy Hotel was locked, but when I rang the bell a man in the neighbouring kebab shop poked his head out. He quizzed me. "Is the lady you're with a nice lady?"

He finished serving a kebab and then came out, unlocked the door and took me upstairs. He showed me a "good room" with twin beds and a hand basin. It was £40, payable in advance. I went to get the team.

"The pillow is in reasonable nick," said Alexander, until she discovered it was, in fact, two thin, very stained, sagging pillows stuffed into one case. The sheets looked clean. The duvets were thin and grubby. There were no mattress protectors.

Alexander declared the two 2ft 6in beds "about as basic as you can get. You can buy a single bed like this for about £50. It's a bed for domestic use. Tens of thousands of these are sold; mostly people use them for children."

"Horrible," was her verdict on comfort when she gingerly tried the bed. "I can feel every spring." As for cleanliness, after the 30-second test, there was a thick layer of greasy grey dust and fluff. "That's not very nice at all," said King, with admirable understatement.

After five minutes, the collection of dirt was still growing, despite the fact that this was a cheap mattress that should have been "bellowing" out dust. The dust-mite allergen level was "high".

Hamdy Ahmed at the Burgundy commented: "We change the bedding after every guest." He added that the beds are replaced every ``three to four years" and new ones are due next month.

The £145 room at the Holiday Inn, Bloomsbury, was fresh and clean. As was the bedding. It was all "good quality". A "pillow menu" listed a choice of natural or synthetic pillows. However, under the covers, the firm mattress, though new-looking, had a large stain to one side.

Even worse, it was damp. The hotel group's spokeswoman admitted later that she did not know the stain's provenance (how could she?), and that the mattress was damp because housekeeping staff had tried to clean it. She also said that the group replace beds every three to four years and that mattresses are replaced if stains cannot be removed.

Comfort-wise, Alexander reckoned she'd "sleep pretty well" in the bed. Dirt-wise, there was "lots more than expected" after five minutes, but the allergen test was "low".

Finally, we went to Claridges, where we found white Frette bed linen and down pillows and duvets. It was all top-notch, as expected, but under the covers, to the shock of the hotel assistant who had been instructed to accompany us, the pocket-sprung mattress had a foot-long rip in the cover; the thick wool padding was visible underneath.

"At least we can see it's good-quality filling," said Alexander as we pondered how a guest had ripped it. A sharp stiletto, perhaps? The mattress was "properly hand-stitched," said Alexander. "None of the others were. It's fairly traditional and at the top end of the market."

Alexander declared Claridge's Savoir bed (made by the Savoy group, of which Claridges is a part) "very, very nice" to lie on. It was her favourite of the day.

Bruce's 30-second test produced a "normal" amount of dust. After five minutes, Bruce concluded that the mattress "is cleaned reasonably well from time to time". The dust-mite allergen test result, however, was "medium to high". Even in a luxury, grande dame of a hotel, dust mites are a problem.

Before rushing to judge the hotels we investigated, hats off to Sheraton and Claridges for agreeing to take part in the test (both knew we were coming, but did not know when or which room we would be testing; other hotels were tested incognito).

Several top London hotels declined to take part - including The Gore, Le Meridien, The Capital (initially keen, but then suddenly mysteriously "fully booked"), the Hilton Group (which wanted to specify a time and a place), The Halkin and The Dorchester, which said "we have perfectly adequate housekeeping".

It's also worth pointing out that the mattresses in our own homes almost certainly contain dust mites and dead skin cells (the fact that they are our dead skin cells and dust mites makes this a little more palatable).

What did give us pause for thought, however, was the lax attitude of hotels towards general mattress care; mattresses the wrong way up, inadequate or missing mattress covers, and rips and stains going unremedied.

Bruce King is so appalled by the lack of care he has witnessed over the years that he now travels with a plastic tarpaulin to put between the mattress and the bottom

sheet. While I'm not suggesting you do the same, it might be worth quizzing hotels not just on their facilities, but on their mattress hygiene.

And before you prepare to sleep where 1,999 people have slept before you, pull back the sheets and inspect the mattress. If you don't like what you see, insist on a room with a newer one. Now you know the facts, it's probably the only way you'll get a good night's sleep. Size - with cleanliness and comfort - is a major factor in a hotel's mattresses.

But the semantics are unregulated and confusing. Generally, in the UK, "king-size" means 5ft wide and "super-king" means 6ft wide. However, in the US, a 5ft-wide bed is a "queen" and a "king" is usually 6ft 4in wide, unless it's a "Californian king" when it's just 6ft wide, the same as our "super-king".

Few reputable hotels provide guests with a "standard" (4ft 6in wide) double bed these days. Surprisingly, some will give honeymooning couples two single beds zipped together. The new five-star Baglioni Hotel in London's Hyde Park Gate, has suites from £599 a night, but, in bed, you'll have to negotiate a small valley to reach across and cuddle your partner. "Some guests like twin beds," said a spokeswoman in the hotel's defence.

Designers also have to bear various hotel-specific factors into account with beds, which is why, even if it's a familiar brand name, most hotel beds are not identical to the ones you buy in a shop. Hotel beds, for example, generally need to be more flame retardant.

## Hotel basics

### Staying there

Rooms at the Sheraton Skyline (020 8759 2535; [www.sheraton.com/skyline](http://www.sheraton.com/skyline)) with a Sweet Sleeper Bed cost from £130. Rooms at Claridges (020 7629 8860; [www.savoy-group.com](http://www.savoy-group.com)) start at £299.

### Further information

The Mattress Doctor (0845 330 6607; [www.matdoc.co.uk](http://www.matdoc.co.uk)).  
The Sleep Council (01756 791089; [www.thesleepcouncil.com](http://www.thesleepcouncil.com)).

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