Baits are essential to effective cockroach control. In housing, they have generally replaced fogs and sprays. However, cockroaches are adapting to avoid the baits – reducing the baits’ effectiveness. Property managers need to adopt an integrated pest management (IPM) program that includes housekeeping, maintenance, and targeted monitoring, to reduce the need for chemical controls, including baits.

Cincinnati housing has its own cockroach strain. Dubbed the “Cincy cockroach” in a 2004 report by researchers at Purdue University, the cockroaches developed “bait aversion.” The cockroaches avoided gel baits with certain sweeteners most cockroaches cannot resist. The sugars are fructose, glucose, maltose, and sucrose. Cincinnati is not alone. A gel bait manufacturer reports that bait-averse cockroaches are in every major city. Put simply, the cockroaches lost the “sweet tooth” that made them so vulnerable to the pesticide in the baits.

The Cincy cockroach also developed a limited resistance to two common active ingredients in baits – abamectin and fipronil. Resistance means that the species has evolved so the active ingredients are not as effective against the pest.

The researchers, Changlu Wang, Michael Scharf, and Gary Bennett, published a follow-up study in 2006. The researchers found that, in breeding the Cincy cockroach with a cockroach strain without the bait aversion characteristic, some of the offspring had bait aversion. The trait was inheritable. Once the trait is inheritable, then it is likely to spread.

The researchers found that the Cincy cockroaches paid a price for this new genetic trait – the egg cases were smaller and had lower number of eggs in each case.

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4 Wang, Scharf, and Bennett, 2004, Behavioral and Physiological Resistance of the German Cockroach to Gel Baits, at 2067.
Fortunately, the bait manufacturers modified their bait formulations to attract strains of bait-averse cockroaches. They used new active ingredients to address the resistance issue. The researchers found that these reformulated baits were effective.5

In the 2004 study, the researchers concluded that “First, rotating gel baits containing different active ingredients apparently will not circumvent this form of resistance. Second, cockroaches will likely develop similar behavioral resistance in response to other inert gel bait matrix ingredients after repeated exposure. Although better control can be achieved by changing the bait matrix, efficacy is likely to diminish over time if current management practices are not revised.”6

This news is not a surprise. Studies in 1995 and 1997 demonstrated that cockroaches were beginning to adapt through bait aversion.7

The lesson remains: Chemical controls as the first – or only – line of defense against residential cockroach infestations are not and effective means of pest management. Cockroaches have an uncanny ability to adapt to pesticides just as bacteria adapt to antibiotics if not effectively eliminated.8

The warning is especially serious in light of two reports on the health threats posed by cockroaches. In 2000, the National Academy of Science concluded that cockroaches and the debris they leave behind trigger asthma attacks in sensitive children.8 The 2005, Inner City Asthma Study found that more than 60% of inner city children have been sensitized to cockroach allergens – most likely as a result of early and sustained exposure.9 Children in public housing are most likely to live in the inner city. Controlling cockroaches is an important method to protect these children from asthma attacks.

We have compelling reasons to use the best available tools to protect residents from cockroaches – for their health today and for the future.

Integrated pest management (IPM) is the best available approach to pest management. Studies by Purdue University at Gary Housing Authority in Indiana10 and the experiences of many pest management professionals in the field make this point clear. Traditional pest control is less effective than IPM. Because it controls cockroaches more effectively, IPM:

- Makes better use of limited resources;
- Reduces cockroaches in housing;
- Helps prevent asthma attacks among residents;
- Improves the quality of life for residents; and
- Provides effective long-term pest control, meaning fewer call-backs and complaints.

5 Id. See Miller and McCoy 2005; Bao and Macom 2005.
6 Id at 2071.
8 Institute of Medicine, 2000, Clearing the Air: Asthma and Indoor Air Exposures. Executive Summary Institute of Medicine, ISBN 0-309-06496-1. See www.nap.edu/books/0309064961/html/.
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