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Roach Buster

The bait debate

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"Mother, you won't believe this. His kitchen is full of roaches. I wouldn't eat anything out of there on a dare," whispered my South Alabama cousin in a telephone call I overheard from the next room.

Sara Shealy had come to town to see our cousin, Alabama quarterback Steadman Shealy, play in the 1980 Sugar Bowl. Sara, a Dothan High School and University of Alabama beauty queen type, had planned to stay at my French Quarter abode for a long weekend. She fled after the first night.

While living with cockroaches was a new experience for this North Alabama native, so were many other things in New Orleans. French bread, cafeterias with two kinds of coffee, reds beans and rice, nuns, city transit, Mardi Gras parades, plastic babies encased in King Cakes and shrimps with their heads on to name a few. I sort of figured every house in New Orleans hosted nocturnal cockroach parties until when I moved into a newly renovated house a few blocks away.

The kitchen is the favorite room for German cockroaches. They look for food once the sun goes down and scurry for cover when exposed to light. They are well adapted to travel by ship. No doubt, German cockroaches arrived with our first European settlers, making them eligible for membership in the Society of the Founders of the City of New Orleans.

The other well known cockroach in New Orleans is the palmetto bug, much larger than our common cockroach and said to be the fastest running insect in the world. The palmetto bug, which can also fly short distances, prefers the outdoors unless they need to come inside for a drink of water during a drought or for warmth during a cold spell.

Cockroaches, like all God's creatures, have attributes. They serve as nature's garbage collectors, removing left over food particles. They have an appetite for bedbugs. It seems reasonable that humans who eat food contaminated by cockroaches could contract foodborne diseases. I doubt this is very common. Mere isolation of disease causing bacteria from cockroaches doesn't translate into causation. Cross contamination from uncooked chicken and other proteins aided by human fingers is a more likely human portal of infection.

Air is another matter. Cockroach feces, secretions and broken up dead body parts are constituents of house dust where these insects thrive. Cockroaches were first linked to asthma as early as 1951. There were a flurry of research reports out of Tulane Medical School describing skin tests with cockroach extracts between '88 and '93.

Epidemiologist Felicia Rabito broke local asthma/cockroach radio silence with a bang in 2011. She and colleagues collected data showing that New Orleans children hospitalized with asthma had high levels of circulating cockroach antibodies. Their most recent outcome findings commanded international attention in January '17.

The Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine researchers followed 102 children with moderate to severe asthma over a 12-month period. They randomized cockroach infested homes into two groups. They baited one group with commercially available insecticidal gels in target areas, such as behind kitchen appliances and back corners of kitchen and bathroom cabinets. The untreated homes served as controls. Roach traps set out every two months showed that use of Advion or Maxforce gel baits essentially eliminated roach populations.

The human outcome data over the year of the study were even more impressive. Children from baited homes had fewer hospitalizations and 47 fewer days with asthma symptoms compared to the children living in unbaited homes.

Back to my earlier cockroach infested townhouse in the French Quarter. My bet is that my old cockroach friends are long gone. Architect Lee Ledbetter renovated the place years ago, and he isn't the type to live with roaches. Debra Shriver and her husband bought the house shortly after Hurricane Katrina. Her book *Stealing Magnolias: Tales from A New Orleans Courtyard* documents adapting the house as a New Orleans home with zero mention of roaches.

What is Asthma?

Nasal hairs, the sinuses and mucus-lined respiratory passages are our personal border fences. They block airborne dirt, germs, pollutants and allergens from reaching the lower respiratory tract. Any small particle that slips through these first lines of defense must next deal with the immune system.

The immune system is a multi-pronged reserve army of inflammatory cells and antibodies ready to roll against invading parasites, bacteria and viruses. And just like home security systems plagued with false alarms, an overly sensitive immune system is the hallmark of asthma.

Asthma is an airway disease with intertwined genetic and allergic overlays. A host of different allergens and irritants can annoy the small airways of the lungs. Irritated cells lining these airways swell and flood the lungs with thick sticky mucus causing various degrees of coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath.

Besides cockroach proteins, twitchy lung triggers include dust mites, molds, various animal danders, pollen, peanuts, viruses, secondhand smoke, stomach acid reflux, cold air and even strong odors, such as Pine-Sol. Other immunologic problems such as atopic dermatitis and hay fever commonly coexist with asthma.

"Over half of children diagnosed with asthma begin wheezing before age three. Among younger children, boys have more asthma. The numbers equalize in adolescence. As adults, women have more asthma," said Dr. Joanne Gates, a now retired pediatric pulmonologist, who treated New Orleans children with asthma for over three decades.

"Recurrent asthma attacks over years can cause irreversible lung damage, including emphysema. Thus, environmental and preventive steps are essential even in the absence of day-to-day symptoms. Childhood asthma usually disappears or dramatically improves during puberty; however, it isn't uncommon for asthma to recur as one gets older," said Gates.