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## Hotel Rooms Get Plusher, Adding to Maids' Injuries

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)

Some call it the "amenities arms race," some "the battle of the beds."

It is a competition in which the nation's premier hotels are trying to have their accommodations resemble royal bedrooms. Superthick mattresses, plush duvets and decorative bed skirts have been added, and five pillows rather than the pedestrian three now rest on a king-size bed. Hilton markets these rooms as Suite Dreams, while Westin boasts of its Heavenly Beds.

The beds may mean sweet dreams to hotel guests, but they mean pain to many of the nation's 350,000 hotel housekeepers. Several new studies have found that thousands of housekeepers are suffering arm, shoulder and lower-back injuries.

"It's gotten harder," said Dolores Reyes, a 55-year-old housekeeper responsible for 16 rooms a day at the Hilton Hawaiian Village in Honolulu. "I've been trying to get my body used to it, but instead I'm feeling more pain. I've had to go to the doctor about my shoulders. That's what's killing me right now."

The problem, housekeepers say, is not just a heavier mattress, but having to rush because they are assigned the same number of rooms as before while being required to deal with far more per room: more pillows, more sheets, more amenities like bathrobes to hang up and coffeepots to wash.

Ms. Reyes complained that some days she must make 25 double beds, a task that entails taking off, and putting on, 100 pillowcases. And then there are vacuuming, dusting, washing mirrors, scrubbing bathroom tiles, cleaning hair dryers, and stocking shampoo and soap.

The hotel workers' union, Unite Here, says injuries and the increased workload will be a major issue in negotiations this spring with Hilton, Starwood and other hotel chains. The union is threatening its biggest strike ever, one that might involve hundreds of hotels in New York, Boston, Chicago, Honolulu, Los Angeles and Toronto.

"Our union has been increasingly pushed by our members in housekeeping to take a close look at this problem," said John W. Wilhelm, president of Unite Here's hospitality division. "The amenity arms race among the major hotel companies has dramatically increased the workload and the injury rate."

Indeed, a union study based on statistics provided by the hotels has found that since 2002, when the amenities race began in earnest, the injury rate for housekeepers has climbed to 71 percent more than for all hotel workers, compared with 47 percent more beforehand.

Another study, by ergonomics professors at Ohio State University, concluded that housekeepers had so strenuous a job that they had a higher risk of back disorders than autoworkers who assemble car doors.

Still other research, by Orr Consulting, a firm dealing in ergonomics, found that the strain of making 12 or more king-size beds a day — many with 115-pound mattresses, 14-pound duvets and three sheets instead of two — exceeded federal occupational safety guidelines on lifting. And in a recent Unite Here survey of 622 housekeepers in Boston, Los Angeles and Toronto, 91 percent

said they had work-related pain, 67 percent had gone to doctors because of that pain and 66 percent took medication for it.

Westin introduced the Heavenly Bed in 1999, touching off the bed wars. Marriott, Crowne Plaza and Hilton joined in, spending hundreds of millions on mattresses, feather-filled duvets, goose-down pillows and softer sheets.

"This has proven to be a very positive thing with the hotel consumer," said Joseph A. McInerney, president of the American Hotel and Lodging Association. "People have said they've gotten the best sleep they've ever had."

Mr. McInerney said the injury rate among hotel workers was lower than that of many other industries.

"As hoteliers," he said, "we really respect what our workers do every day, because they take care of our guests. We don't want to do anything that endangers them."

But William S. Marras, co-director of the Institute for Ergonomics at Ohio State, found that the heavier lifting and a greater workload endangered housekeepers.

Professor Marras has helped develop an elaborate apparatus, the Lumbar Motion Monitor, that is placed along workers' spines to measure the strain of their movements.

"We heard that things were changing for hotel housekeepers, and so we applied this to them," he said. "I was surprised to see how risky these jobs were."

Housekeepers, who earn \$17,300 a year on average, invariably stoop over to lift mattresses, some of which are only 14 inches off the floor. They frequently twist their backs as they tuck in the sheets, often three of them rather than the two of yesteryear. Since it can take 10 to 12 minutes a bed, a housekeeper who makes 25 beds a day frequently spends four to five hours on the task, lifting mattresses 150 to 200 times.

"Almost every day I take Motrin 800," said Jackie Branson, 50, a housekeeper at the Chicago Hilton and Towers. "It's for my back and my shoulders, mostly."

After a day in which Ms. Branson has cleaned 14 rooms in the elite Towers section, she feels "whipped, beat, especially at the end of a bad day."

"Every time you turn around," she said, "there's something new that has been added."

Hilton recently sent Unite Here a report acknowledging that 20 workers at the Chicago Hilton reported injuries last year from making beds.

But Marc Grossman, a spokesman for Hilton, said the company had increased training to try to minimize harm to housekeepers in amenity-filled rooms. The company is also easing workloads, he said, by removing bathtubs from rooms with king-size beds, leaving just showers, and, to reduce dusting, by removing bulky armoires and replacing boxy televisions with flat-screen TV's.

Mr. Grossman said Unite Here was pushing the injury issue as a smoke screen, largely to pressure hotel companies to agree to procedures making it easier to organize workers at the chains' nonunion hotels.

He said Hilton's injury rate had fallen since 2001. Though he declined to provide detailed numbers, other officials of the industry noted that the rate among all hotel workers, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, dropped to 5.6 per 100 workers in 2004, from more than 6 in each of the previous four years.

But Eric Frumin, Unite Here's safety director, noted its research suggesting that while the rate appeared to be declining for hotel workers as a whole, it was climbing for housekeepers.

"This job category," said Dr. Peter Orris, professor of occupational health sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, "has not had much prominence. We need to investigate how to reduce these injuries and this kind of stress at work."

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