

# School Health

Betty Sue Hinkson RN, School Nurse

## Nit Picking

What a headache! If you have ever received a phone call from the school nurse telling you that your child was found to have head lice you know just what a headache it can be to get rid of. To help you out I will go through it again, but first here is some basic information about those pesky little bugs.

### **What are head lice?**

Head lice (one is called a louse, appropriately) are small grayish-white insect about 1/16 to 1/8 of an inch in length that lives in hair and on the scalp. The eggs are called nits. They are even smaller than the lice but are usually easier to see because they don't run and hide like the bugs do. Dandruff can sometimes be mistaken for nits, but if you look closer, it is easy to distinguish between the two. Nits are glued to the hair and must be scraped off the hair with fingernails, while dandruff, dried hair spray, gels and other hair products can be easily blown away or moved.

### **Who gets head lice?**

Anyone may get head lice under the right conditions. They are often found in children who are in elementary school and day care. Head lice occur in all socioeconomic groups and are not a sign of uncleanness. Lice can only survive for about a day without a human host because they survive on human blood. They cannot live on family pets and they do not live on human hair anywhere other than on the head.

### **How are lice spread?**

Lice do not fly or jump or hop. They can only crawl off of an infested head onto another. They crawl very fast, which is why they can spread easily from person to person. They can be spread by sharing combs, brushes, hats, curlers, helmets, coats, scrunchies, headphones or similar items. You can even get it from going to the movies and sitting in a seat where someone with lice sat earlier. Another place you can get lice is trying on hats, coats, Halloween masks and costumes at the store, or hanging your coat next to someone who has lice. The only way to totally prevent you and your family from getting lice is to never leave your house or let anyone else in. Obviously, we can't live like this, but we can be careful. Teach your child not to share hats or any of the above listed items whenever possible.

### **What are the symptoms of head lice?**

Itching is the most common symptom of head lice infestation, but children may not always complain of itching. A thorough examination of the hair and scalp is necessary to find head lice and nits.

### **What is the treatment for head lice?**

You can use medicated shampoo, crème rinse, mousse or gel specifically designed to kill lice. There are also treatments on the market that do not contain pesticides. If you decide to use a pediculicide (louse killing shampoo or crème rinse) please check with your pharmacist or physician and choose the correct product for each family member. Follow the directions on the package and do not overuse the treatments. Pediculicides should not be used on any child under 6 months of age, and preferably not on anyone under 3 years of age with asthma or plant allergies. They should also never be used on women who are pregnant or nursing, or anyone with cuts or abrasions on the head. There is also a smothering treatment done with olive oil, mayonnaise or Vaseline. You can check your

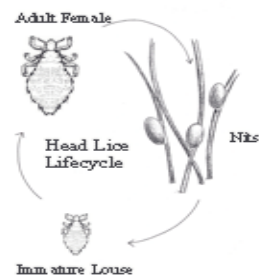
local library or the internet for more information. Whichever treatment you decide on, remember to follow the instructions or it may not work properly. Most products should be used again in seven to ten days to make sure any lice which hatched after the first treatment are killed. No commercially available product kills 100% of the bugs or nits. **ALL the nits need to be removed, or they will hatch and continue to infest the head.** Special fine-toothed combs are usually available with the shampoo or rinse to aid in removing nits, but removing the nits by pulling them off the hair strands between your fingernails works best. Ever heard the phrase "nit picking"? This is where it comes from.

### **What can be done to prevent the spread of head lice?**

1. Head lice are contagious, so check everyone else living in the house and treat if necessary.
2. Clothing, sheets, blankets, and bedspreads should be washed in hot water and dried in a dryer to destroy lice and their eggs. Dry cleaning or storing clothing in plastic bags for ten days is also effective for objects that cannot be laundered.
3. Combs, brushes, and similar items can be treated by soaking them for 5-10 minutes in a pan of water heated to 128 degrees F or soaking them for one hour in the medicated shampoo or rinse.
4. Thoroughly vacuum the carpets and upholstery. There are sprays available, but it is not necessary to buy the commercial sprays to treat furniture. Fumes from such sprays may be harmful to people and pets.
5. Regular inspection for head lice in children attending elementary school or day care is recommended.

To get rid of lice you must follow these three steps: **1) you must kill all the live lice** (by medicated shampoo, pediculicide, or smothering olive oil treatment), **2) check for and remove all the nits** (or they will hatch and reinfest the head, and **3) clean the home environment**. If one of these steps is missed, you will probably get lice again.

When I get a call from a school about a child with reported case of head lice I will check that child. If I find it on that child I will try to check that class. I will also check any siblings, and if I find head lice, will try to check their classes too. It is impossible for me to check the entire school with every reported case. Just to reassure parents; I almost never find another case in the same class. I have seen very few cases that were spread at school.



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