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HEAD LICE FAQ

What are Head Lice?

The Head Louse, *Pediculus capitus*, is a well-adapted human parasite. It can live only on the human head, does not do significant damage to its human host (except in cases of very severe infestations, in which there can be fever and swollen glands), and is well adapted to cling to and travel along hair shafts. The female lays eggs, called nits (which adhere tightly to the hair shaft), close to the scalp.

What is the Head Lice life-cycle?

The louse lives about 30 days. The female can lay eggs when she reaches 10 days of age, and she will lay an average of 6-10 eggs/per day, or about 120-200 eggs during her life. Eggs hatch in 7-10 days, and a “nymph” emerges. The nymph is tiny and almost transparent until it takes its first blood meal, when it darkens in color. The louse will molt three times in the first 9-10 days of life, increasing in size with each molt.

How do lice move?

Lice can only move by crawling. They cannot hop, jump, or fly. They move from one head to another when two people come into close contact.

Why don't I see adult lice in my child's head?

Lice tend to move away from light and toward heat (i.e., toward the scalp). Thus, while we are examining a child's head, the lice are moving away from the light to a different part of the head.

Can lice be transmitted by sitting on furniture where an affected person has been?

This is a less common way to get lice. Once off the human head, lice have no source of food and will die in 24-48 hours. In order to survive, the louse has to find a new human host. So, if a louse is on a hair shaft that has fallen off someone's head, and another person sits down in that place within 2 days, that louse could climb onto the second person. If the louse is a gravid female (female with eggs), the infestation process would then begin.

How do you treat Head Lice?

The keys to treatment are:

1. Killing the adult lice with a pediculicide and combing with a fine tooth comb *and*
2. Finding and removing the nits. This needs to be done in a systemic way, section by section of hair *and*
3. Checking other family members to determine whether they need to be treated, too.
4. Cleaning of combs/brushes/hair accessories, bed linens, furniture, car upholstery and bagging stuffed animals are also good strategies. However, the best use of time is in steps 1, 2, & 3. The most important items to clean are combs/brushes/hair accessories and the sheets, pillowcases and blankets which should be washed in hot water (130°, but turn the hot water back down below 120° to avoid scald burns when finished).

Does the school notify families about Head Lice cases?

We recognize that having head lice affect your family is a nuisance. Notices are sent home based on the School Nurses' assessment of which students have been in close contact with the affected.