

September is National Head Lice Prevention Month

Head lice infestation is common worldwide, with the majority of cases in children 3 to 12 years of age. Head lice are not a sign of uncleanliness and are not responsible for the spread of diseases in the United States. They are related to another species of insect, body lice, which have been associated with typhus in other areas of the world.

Watch for signs of head lice, such as frequent head scratching. Anyone can get lice - lice do not jump or fly, they crawl. The way to "catch" them is mainly by head to head contact, but also from sharing hats, scarves, coats, hair ties, combs, brushes and headrests.

Diagnosing head lice can be difficult. Lice are small (sesame seed sized) brown to gray wingless insects. They are parasites and depend on tiny amounts of human blood (you will not find them on your pets) to live and cannot survive more than 2 days away from a human host.

Nits (eggs) are grayish white (difficult to see), oval, and glued at angle to the hair shaft, very close (1/4 inch) to the scalp, usually behind the ears and at the nape of the neck. Nits are often confused with dandruff and other hair debris; nits cannot be "brushed" off - they are firmly attached and difficult to remove. Empty (not live) nit cases are more easily seen, appearing yellowish-white, often further away from the scalp.

Live eggs are incubated by body heat and hatch in 10-14 days (eggs cannot develop and hatch away from the scalp and normal room temperatures). Once the eggs hatch, nymphs grow for about 9-12 days then mate. If there is no treatment, the cycle repeats about every three weeks.

Treatment requires the use of a pediculicide - remember that all lice killing products are pesticides and must be used with care - *read and follow all directions closely and completely*. RID and Nix are the most common and effective, but no chemical treatment is 100% effective so treatment must be repeated in about 10 days to kill newly born nymphs hatched from eggs that survived the first treatment, before they have the chance to mature and reproduce. **Manual removal of lice and nits**, from the head AND environment is the single most effective part of the treatment. There are many "alternative" methods for treatment, but it is important to know that none of these have been proven effective in large clinical trials.

Machine wash in hot water all washable clothing and bedding that the infested person has used in the two days prior to treatment. Dry in the dryer using high heat for at least 20 minutes. Items that cannot be washed can be bagged in plastic for two weeks to be sure any stray lice or nits have died. Hair items may be soaked in hot water for 10 minutes or Lysol for one hour. **Avoid lice sprays!** Vacuuming is the safest and best way to remove lice or fallen hairs with attached nits from upholstered furniture, rugs, stuffed animals and car seats

Notify your child's school, camp, child care provider or neighborhood parents. Check all members of your family on a regular basis. This is the best way to protect your family and community. Head lice are the cause of much embarrassment and misunderstanding. A little bit of accurate and up to date knowledge can go far to reduce the panic people feel when they hear the words "head lice". For more reliable, accurate information, visit <http://www.headlice.org>, <http://www.aap.org/policy/0203.html> or call the Otsego County Department of Health at 547-4230. Another excellent website for kids and parents is http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/ill_injure/sick/lice.html

