

A Head Lice Primer

Facts about head lice:

- Head lice can infest any head
- Head lice do not transmit or carry diseases
- Head lice pose no known health hazard
- The worst things about head lice are the itching, the difficulty of getting rid of them and the social stigma
- Head lice are most prevalent from August to November
- Their only source of food is human blood; they are totally dependent on their host for nourishment
- Head lice infest people with long hair as well as short hair, they're just harder to find in longer hair
- Most people who have head lice are healthy, hygienic people; in fact head lice seem to prefer clean heads
- Head lice crawl; they do not jump or fly
- Head lice cannot survive on animals
- Head lice are about the size of a sesame seed and light brown in color, getting darker as they grow older from blood consumption
- Head lice live about 30 days on a human head, only 1-3 days off of it
- Lice live by biting and sucking blood from the scalp
- The most common places for infestation are the nape of the neck, behind the ears and the crown of the head, though head lice may be found anywhere on the scalp

Facts about nits (Head lice eggs)

- Nits are tiny, egg-shaped, white globules attached to hair strands by the female with a very strong glue, usually close to the scalp to absorb the host's body heat
- Dandruff, hair spray bubbles and other debris are often mistaken for nits
- Nits only live for a few days off of a human head
- Nits hatch about a week after birth
- The average female lays 3 to 4 nits day and up to 100 during her 30-day lifespan
- Nits are best removed by hand, not with a comb or other devices
- Pesticide treatment kills the live head lice, not the nits

Symptoms of Head Lice

- The most common symptom of head lice is itching
- Red marks or blotches on the scalp could also indicate the presence of head lice
- The presence of nits

Checking for Head Lice

- Always wear rubber gloves and utilize a wooden stick if possible to part the hair
- Utilize natural light to examine a student; head lice run from the light and are hard to locate because they run very quickly from any bright light
- Check for the presence of nits; lice sightings are rare
- Nits close to the scalp usually indicate the existence of a live female; nits further than ¼" from the scalp have a small chance of germinating into live lice
- Use a magnifying glass if possible
- If a white substance cannot be blown or flicked away from the strand of hair, it's very likely a nit

Treatment of Head Lice

- If live head lice are suspected, an over-the-counter pesticide is recommended
- Treat only those individuals who are infested
- Treat again after 7-10 days to kill the recently hatched eggs
- For two weeks after treatment check scalp daily for nits, removing them by hand (nit combs have minimal impact)
- Wash all clothes, bed items, etc., in very hot water and dry the items in a hot dryer
- Hot wash/machine dry all bedding items daily for ten days
- Wrap those items which cannot be washed (stuffed animals, etc) in a sealed plastic bag for at least ten days
- Vacuum all upholstered furniture and carpets for ten days
- Use a commercial spray on upholstered furniture several times after lice are discovered

How Head Lice Spread

- Direct physical contact between children (more prevalent in younger children) is the most common method of infestation
- Using another child's comb, brush, barrette or other hair grooming item can, in a relatively few cases, spread head lice
- Sharing articles of clothing, hats, scarves, etc, can also spread head lice in some instances
- Lying on an infested mattress, upholstered chair or couch or carpet can spread head lice

Preventing Head Lice in the Classroom

- Encourage children not to share clothing and hair accessories
- Utilize separate plastic bins for each child's personal items
- Encourage children with long hair to keep their hair tied or braided
- Watch for tell tale scratching
- Talk to your children about the problem, being careful not to stigmatize those who may become afflicted with head lice
- Do not allow children to pile their jackets and clothing; provide for some separation between each child's items

Gifford's Head Lice Procedures

- Teachers suspecting head lice should contact the office; the child will be discreetly checked out of sight of the from the class
- Any child with live head lice or excessive nits close to the scalp will be sent home as soon as parents are contacted
- Children sent home for evidence of lice must be examined by the school's designated person the next day, prior to returning to class
- Chronic offenders (usually the third occurrence) will be referred to the County Health Clinic
- Absences due to head lice will be excused
- The presence of nits only will generate a parent contact by the office and not always result in a child being sent home; each situation will be handled individually, depending on the circumstance
- Upon their return, students who have nits in their hair will be examined by the designated person prior to return to class
- Every attempt will be made to educate affected parents regarding the elimination of head lice in their homes

SUMMARY;

The biggest issues in this matter are the perceived stigma of head lice and the inherent social issues. People tend to panic and over react to a situation that is really more of a nuisance, and not actually a health or safety issue. Head Lice are a miserable affliction, but they are no health danger. As stated earlier, they can happen to anybody's kids. All schools, particularly elementary schools, deal with this problem on an annual basis, usually in the fall. We are no different.

Any child can get head lice, but the general perception is that only "dirty" children are afflicted. That couldn't be further from the truth!

As for the "zero tolerance no-nits policies" instituted by some schools; the "cure" is worse than the disease. It should not be a policy or practice to indiscriminately send children with nits home. Nits, as stated earlier, are often difficult to identify and cannot be transmitted or shared. Nits are not of themselves a problem. They are an indicator of a potential problem once they hatch, and hatching only happens on the hair they were originally glued to.

With your assistance, some preventative efforts and parent education, we can deal effectively with the inevitable cases of head lice that we'll face in the coming school year. With a knowledgeable staff and some sensible measures we can keep this yearly nuisance to a minimum.