Head Lice: Facts to Help Ditch the Itch

Posted by griff On 02/12/2011

Take a closer look at that scalp. What may initially look like dandruff could be head lice.

Pediculus humanus capitis, or the head louse, lives and feeds exclusively on the human head. These tiny insects live in the human hair, causing intense itching, after they have been present for several weeks.

More of a nuisance than a medical threat, these tan or grayish-white insects are roughly the size of sesame seeds and don't fly or jump. The nits, or eggs of adult lice, are laid where the hair shaft meets the scalp, making them difficult to see and remove. Severe scratching of an infected head may lead to breaks in the skin, secondary infections, fever or fatigue.

Unlike popular belief, lice are not a sign of poor hygiene, but rather easily latch on to clean hair.

According to the EPA, head lice is most often found on children between the ages of three and ten, occurring less often on older kids and adults. While many parents worry about infestations occurring at their children's schools, it's much more likely that the pests will be transmitted in the home.

Head-to-head contact, as well as the sharing of hair brushes, towels, hats and pillows, is the most common methods lice are spread. Locally, the schools don't routinely check every child for head lice, as it would be incredibly time consuming and not cost-effective. They do, however, have procedures to follow if a student is found to be affected, which include checking siblings and other students with close contact.

Late in 2010, Calvert County Public Schools addressed parents' concern about what is being done to prevent infestations in the classroom, stating, "The school nurses send home information on head lice several times each year. This information is to encourage parents to do periodic checks of their children's hair."

Frequent scratching of the head may be the first sign of a problem. Small, red bumps on the scalp, neck and shoulders may help you identify head lice, along with tiny, white specks on the bottom of the hair shaft that are difficult to pick out. Nits are most commonly found around the top of the neck and ears. To see head lice, you must look closely in good light and possibly even use a magnifying glass.

When it comes time for treatment, the tedious use of a specialized metal-toothed comb is the most effective way to remove nits. Both over-the-counter and prescription products containing pesticides can be used to treat head lice, but many health organizations urge caution in their use, and particularly their over-use. Directions of the specific product used should be adhered to closely.

Treatment, it is suggested, should include thorough vacuuming, hot water and high heat laundering of linens and clothing and extremely hot water soaks of combs and brushes.

Head lice cannot live on pets, nor can they be passed via the household cat or dog. Good communication with your child's teacher, school nurse or daycare provider can assure that an outbreak can be avoided and that they are free of live lice and nits before returning to a public environment.

Close-up of nits and live, adult lice in human hair.

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