

Dear Parents,

Now that the weather is changing, children are starting to spend more time indoors and beginning to wear hats and scarves again. This is a good time to review some information about head lice.

What are head lice?

Head lice are small wingless insects (about the size of a sesame seed) that live on the human scalp and in the hair. There are records of lice for as long as there are records of humans!

Lice move by crawling; they can't fly, hop or jump. They can fall off the head and will then die within 72 hours. An adult female may lay 3-5 nits (egg casings) per day which are glued so strongly to hair shafts that only fingernails or a specially designed 'nit' comb will remove them (normal brushing or washing won't remove nits). Once laid, it takes 7-10 days for a nit to hatch, and another 7-10 days for the female to mature and begin laying her own eggs.

Who is at risk for getting head lice?

Anyone who comes in close contact (especially head-to-head) with someone who already has head lice is at greatest risk. Occasionally, head lice may be acquired from contact with an infested person's clothing (such as hats, scarves, coats) or other personal items (such as brushes, towels, fabric sports helmets). This contact may occur at school, but may also occur at sleepovers, camps, sports, or other activities. Current research indicates that schools are often not the environments where the transmission is most likely. Head lice can also be transferred from person to person via coats, furry stuffed animals, fabric covered seats, pillows, carpets, and bedding that have been used by an infested person. **Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with getting head lice.**

What should parents look for?

Head lice are clear in color when hatched and can appear gray, tan or reddish brown in color after feeding. They have six legs. They are hard to see and avoid light.

Nits are head lice eggs. They are very small, about the size of a knot in thread. They are firmly attached to the hair shaft. Although they may look like dandruff, they cannot be removed by flicking them with the finger. They are oval and usually yellow to white. Eggs that are likely to hatch are usually located within ¼ inch of the scalp. Care should be taken to examine the scalp at nape of the neck and behind the ears.

What are the symptoms of head lice infestation?

Some symptoms of lice infestation include: a tickling feeling in the hair; itching caused by a reaction to the bites; irritability; sores on the head due to scratching (which can sometimes become infected); or a rash behind the ears and on the neck below the hairline. However, it should be noted that head lice infestation can occur without any symptoms whatsoever.

How are head lice discovered?

An infestation is discovered by looking closely through the hair and scalp for nits and/or lice. The discovery may be made by a parent, school nurse, or other medical provider.

How are head lice treated?

Head lice are treated by washing the hair with a medicated lice shampoo and removing nits from the hair. Treatment continues for at least 7-10 days. Personal items, such as combs, brushes, towels, clothing, and bedding also need to be cleaned. Furniture and carpets must be vacuumed. Lice sprays and regular shampoos are not recommended.

What can parents do to prevent their families from getting head lice?

Check your children for head lice at least every week. Use a bright light and look closely. Avoid sharing hair care items, clothing, hats, towels and bedding. Avoid throwing jackets and hats in a pile at group activities. Using medicated shampoos without the presence of lice or nits will not prevent a person from becoming infested.

Can my pets get head lice?

No, head lice are a human condition.

What do the schools do when there is an infestation in the schools?

Although it is unpleasant, the occurrence of head lice is common throughout the country. If there is a reported case of head lice, the schools follow the approved administrative procedures based on the most current, research-based information. If an infestation is verified, the infested student is sent home until treatment can be completed. Parents are given information about the steps to follow. The student may return to school as soon as treatment can be verified. It is important that instructional time be protected. The school nurse follows-up with that student and the treatment plan. The school also follows the established protocol for cleaning.

In addition, school staff examine the infested student's siblings and other known close contacts. The administrator and school nurse have discretion about which students to examine. A letter is sent to those parents of students with whom the infested child may have had close contact. It is not best practice to either examine the entire school or notify

the entire parent population regarding selected infestation of head lice. The school needs to prevent the spread of head lice while protecting a student's confidentiality.

Why are head lice at schools? Is it worse now than when I was a child?

Lice have cycles as does most of nature. There may be a decade or more without evidence of lice when their numbers are so low, they defy detection. Then, at other times, they are readily present in our communities. Lice have evolved over thousands of years and they continue to thrive because they defy detection until their numbers make them easier to see.

Can my child get head lice from sharing headphones?

The anatomy of head lice is such that they fall off vinyl surfaces such as headphones and bus seats. The use of personal headphones in the schools will be at the discretion of the building administrator.

For further information, the following are helpful websites:

www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html

www.nasn.org (National Organization of School Nurses)

www.dph.cdc.gov (Center for Disease Control)

Please call your school nurse if you suspect that your child has lice or if you would like further information. All exchanges will be kept confidential.

Sincerely,

Name
Certified School Nurse