

Health Information about Head Lice

September 2008

September is National Pediculus Prevention Month, an appropriate time for us to share information with parents about one of childhood's most common health conditions – head lice.

What exactly are head lice?

The head louse, or *Pediculus humanus capitis*, is a parasitic insect that can be found on the head, eyebrows and eyelashes of people, but most commonly are found in the scalp. Head lice feed on human blood several times a day and live close to the human scalp. They are not known to spread disease but can be irritating to the skin.

Who is at risk for getting head lice?

Head lice are found worldwide. An estimated 6 million to 12 million infestations occur each year in the United States among children 3 to 11 years of age. They move by crawling (they cannot hop or fly from person-to-person) and are spread by direct contact with the hair of an infected person.

Anyone who comes in direct contact with someone who already has head lice is at greatest risk. Head lice are also commonly spread by contact with clothing (such as hats, scarves, coats) or other personal items (such as combs, brushes, or towels). Dogs, cats and other pets do not play a role in the spread of human lice. Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with getting head lice.

What do head lice look like?

Head lice have three forms: the egg (also called a nit), the nymph and the adult. Nits are lice eggs which are firmly attached to the hair shaft and are oval-shaped and very small – about the size of a knot in thread. They are hard to see, but often appear yellow or white. They can easily be confused with dandruff, scabs or hair spray/gel droplets.

A nymph is an immature louse that hatches from the nit. It looks like an adult head louse, only smaller. The fully grown and developed adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs and is tan to grayish-white in color. Adult head lice may look darker in persons with dark hair than in persons with light hair.

What are the signs and symptoms of head lice?

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of the head louse.
- Irritability and difficulty sleeping (head lice are most active in the dark)
- Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected with bacteria found on the person's skin.

How are head lice diagnosed?

The diagnosis of head lice is best made by finding a live nymph or adult louse on the scalp or hair of a person. Because nymphs and adult lice are very small, move quickly and avoid light, they can be difficult to find.

Healthcare providers can use magnifying lens and/or use a fine-toothed comb to find live lice. If crawling lice are not seen, finding nits firmly attached within a 1/4 inch of base of the hair shafts strongly suggests, but does not confirm, head lice infestation. Nits that are attached more than 1/4 inch from the base of the hair shaft are almost always dead or already hatched.

Because head lice can be confused with other conditions, diagnosis should be made by a school nurse, health care provider, local health department or another person trained to identify head lice.

How are head lice treated?

Many head lice medications are available over-the-counter without a prescription at local drug stores and pharmacies. The person diagnosing head lice can suggest an appropriate medication for children and young adults. Health providers sometimes may recommend a prescription product.

What about “Super Lice?”

Some news reports have indicated that some head lice – dubbed “Super Lice” – are becoming resistant to some over-the-counter medications. While it’s true that an organism can adapt and grow resistant to the pesticides in these products, there is no evidence that Super Lice or persistent head lice infections are occurring in Fulton County schools.

What if I suspect my child has head lice?

First and foremost, please know that personal hygiene or cleanliness has nothing to do with getting head lice. It also is nothing to be ashamed of – head lice is incredibly common among children.

If you suspect your child has head lice, please seek a formal diagnosis from a health provider and notify the school’s health clinic. Head lice can easily be confused with other health conditions and a formal diagnosis should be obtained before treatment is administered. If the school suspects your child has head lice, you will be notified and will be asked to seek treatment for your student.

Information sources:

Centers for Disease Control

Fulton County Schools Student Health Services