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## Head Lice

If you have children in school you have either already dealt with head lice or more than likely will have this problem before they conclude their school career. It is more prevalent in elementary school, but a person of any age can contract lice. Even children from the cleanest homes can pick up head lice.

According to the National Association of School Nurses, more than 6 million Americans are infested with head lice annually. They can be transferred among people through the sharing of brushes, combs, towels, hats, or are in close contact with an infected person. Lice will not leave the host unless dislodged; they must have temperatures of 82 to 86 degrees F. to live. They will die if separated from their host after 2 – 4 days.

The size of a head louse is 2 to 3 mm long. Colors vary, but they usually blend in with the hair color of the host. They sometimes are white to grayish-black. Head lice have three stages, which are egg (nit), nymph, and adult. The female can lay as many as four to six nits a day, which are oval, light tan in color, and about the size of a particle of sand. They are normally glued to the base of a strand of hair, most especially near the ears and back of the head. Under normal conditions, eggs will hatch in 5 – 7 days. The entire life cycle is completed in 15 to 21 days and adults may live up to 30 days.

If you suspect you have lice you should seek the advice of a doctor or school nurse and follow their advice. Most will suggest using an over-the-counter product, which contain permethrin or pyrethrum plus piperonyl butoxide as the active ingredient. There are other products that are available by prescription only. A second treatment must always be made 7 to 10 days later to kill newly hatched lice. Along with the medicated shampoo it is a good idea to remove all lice and nits by hand. Most kits come with a comb made especially for this task.

All bedding, towels, and clothing should be washed in hot water (at least 125 degree F) for at least 10 minutes. Vacuum carpets, pillows, and mattresses to remove fallen hairs with attached nits. There are also products you can spray on bedding. Wash brushes and combs in hot, soapy water (at least 125 degrees F) for about 20 minutes. All family members should be inspected and undergo simultaneous treatments if lice is detected.

There are several “old wives tales” about different products that get rid of lice, such as olive oil, mayonnaise, margarine, or other food-grade oils. However, there isn’t any conclusive evidence to prove if these methods are effective. Most importantly, never use products that are dangerous, which include pet shampoos, kerosene, motor oil, gasoline, or household pesticides.

For more information on this topic, feel free to contact the Texas AgriLife Extension Service office at 903/473-5000, ext. 157.

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