

ITEM HEAD LICE INFESTATION (PEDICULOSIS)

POLICY Head lice are tiny animals, smaller than fleas, which transfer easily from one person to another in situations where people are in close contact. The lice lay eggs (nits) which adhere to strands of hair, particularly hair on the back of the neck and behind the ears. The movement of lice on the head causes itchiness and people affected by head lice can sometimes suffer infections of the scalp from scratching. Infestation is identifiable. The nits look like whitish specks stuck to the hair. However, in blond hair the nits are hard to see.

Many children are diagnosed as having head lice and/or nits, when in fact they either have many dead nits in their hair, or are suffering from a condition known as 'pseudo-pediculosis' (protein globules on the hair shafts resembling nits). This condition is caused by over treatment of the original infestation.

The head louse (*Pediculus humanus capitis*)

- The human head louse lives only on the scalp where there is food and a suitable temperature.
- The eggs or nits are laid close to the scalp and hatch in seven to ten days.
The young louse requires two weeks to become mature and lay eggs. Lice do not survive more than two days away from a human host, but eggs may survive longer.
- It is considered that any nit found more than fifteen millimetres from the scalp is either dead or hatched. Such nits are not a sign of active infestation.

Transmission

Head lice are transmitted by the movement of the louse from one head to another. This happens under conditions of close physical contact, mostly at home or at school. Lice may sometimes be transmitted by sharing hats, combs and brushes. It is considered unlikely that lice could be transmitted by means of furniture, carpets, bedding, etc.

Facts

Head lice infestation has now been identified as a risk to health during epidemics.

While occasional and infrequent episodes do not pose a health risk, recurrent or prolonged attacks may cause local skin and gland infection.

Lice do not jump from one head to another.

The human head louse does not breed on animals, furniture, carpets, bedding, etc.

Lice are no respecters of social class.

Clean people get head lice.

Children are not the only ones who become infested. If one family member is affected, others in the family are **likely to be infested too**.

During school holidays, pediculosis does not disappear—it is not heard about because there is no one to whom one can complain.

The reservoir of head lice is very often not the school, but an adult at home who is unaware of the problem.

There is no special season for head lice infestation.

Hair does not have to be cut short to aid in the eradication. All the action is at the scalp—the egg laying, hatching, feeding, killing.

Weekly washing of the hair with ordinary shampoo does not prevent or cure the condition.

Treatment

Suitable preparations for the treatment of head lice infestation are available at Territory pharmacies. Territory Health Services recommends that one of these commercial products be used, strictly in accordance with the directions on the package.

Normally, these preparations contain Lyban.

Hair should be washed with the treatment shampoo as directed. Then, while the hair is still wet it should be combed with a fine tooth comb to remove the nits. This combing should be repeated the next morning.

The combing is carried out with the head held down over a piece of newspaper. The parent should carefully comb the child's hair upwards from the scalp, a section at a time, to ensure that nits are dislodged. Dipping the comb in vinegar may make this easier.

If the directions on the package do not forbid it, treatment should be repeated weekly for one or two weeks. Repeating the application in this manner will help to kill any remaining live nits.

Wash all the family's pillowcases and sheets, brushes and combs on the day the treatment is used.

Note All family members must be treated at the same time.

School attendance

Due to the fact that Territory Health Services has now declared nit infestation to be a health risk where recurrent or prolonged attacks occur, Principals have the authority to exclude children with infestations from school until such time as appropriate scalp treatment has been carried out.

If the scalp has been properly treated on one occasion, the child should be able to go to school the next day, because all the adult lice and most of the nits will be dead. Any lice which hatch from remaining live nits will not lay eggs themselves for about a week to ten days.

If there is any doubt whether or not appropriate treatment has been carried out prior to the readmission of the child to school, Principals have the authority to seek signed certification from a medical practitioner, school nurse or community health centre.

Prevention

Parents should inspect their children's heads each week. Lice are difficult to see, not only because of their size, but also their colour. Nits are easily detected. Particular areas to inspect are the nape of the neck, under fringes and behind the ears. Once nits are detected, treatment as outlined above will prevent the infestation spreading.

- Don't share brushes, combs, hats or pillows. Wash hair brushes and combs at least once a week.
- Keep hair clean and tie long hair back while at school.

Responsibility

It is a parental responsibility to detect and treat head lice infestations.

Head lice is a problem of a social nature, and the solution lies in raising community awareness of the problem and encouraging parents to shoulder responsibility for the treatment of infested family members.

Parents who need help in identifying head lice infestations should seek advice from the family doctor or from a community health centre. Suitable solutions for the treatment of head lice infestation are available over the counter from pharmacies. Territory Health Services provides free treatment at community health centres for people who hold health care cards and for their dependants.

Community health staff are available for consultation by schools. Where head lice cases are identified at school, the school teacher should notify parents of children affected, who should keep the child home from school until treatment has been carried out. The Principal should exclude children with infestation from school until appropriate treatment has been undertaken. Department of Health and Community Services staff will conduct individual counselling with parents of persistently infested children, if the parents so wish.

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