

Head Lice: Anyone Can Get Them, But You Don't Have To Keep Them

BY SUSAN USHER

They were found in King Tut's tomb. George Washington had them. Children are likely to have them, spreading the infestation to other family members or playmates. Head lice don't discriminate.

At one time the presence of lice was generally associated with uncleanliness of a home or family. But we know better these days. Head lice make their home on any convenient head—black and white, rich and poor, young and old.

Head lice travel fastest in places where people come together in close contact, the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services says in a brochure on the subject. It says exposure to an infested individual is the principal factor that determines who becomes infected. Lice can be easily introduced into schools, churches, camps and even hospitals—anywhere they can travel from head to head.

In fact, the start of school often marks an increase in lice infestations, as does the first hint of cold weather.

Their rate of travel picks up when someone with lice shares a cap, scarf or comb with someone else.

But once identified, head lice are treatable. An infestation won't last long with proper—and prompt—attention.

Rita Hatcher, public health educator with the Brunswick County Health Dept. says it is important for all to be alert to signs and symptoms and then to respond quickly.

What To Look For

The common head louse, also known as *pediculus capitis*, is a tiny wingless insect, about the size of a pinhead, according to the booklet, *Detecting, Treating and Preventing the Spread of Human Lice*. The louse makes its home on the scalp and the hair on that scalp. A sucking parasite, it feeds on blood. The louse has a small, flattened body and six, short legs with opposing thumbs for grasping the shaft of a hair.

The oval eggs, or nits, are usually easier to see than the lice themselves. The small, silvery white nits are often mistaken for dandruff—but are a lot harder to remove. They attach to individual hair shafts near the scalp, with a cement-like bonding agent. The scalp may look reddish, which is a sign of feeding. During its typical 20- to 30-day life span, a female louse can lay as many as six eggs a day. Lice can live off the body for up to 10 days; the nits, up to 30 days, reinfesting the patient or infesting others.

If you notice that your children and/or family members are scratch-



WHEN MAGNIFIED, the grasping opposing thumbs of the common head louse are easily seen.

ing more than usual, especially behind the ears, on the nape of the neck and on the crown of their heads, they may have head lice.

And, says Ms. Hatcher, some people have more severe symptoms. These include swelling of the lymph glands in the neck and under the arms, a mild fever and muscular aches.

Preventive Precautions

The sooner you discover head lice, the better. And the sooner you treat, the better, to prevent spreading the infestation to others.

If treatment procedures are followed carefully, the possibility of reinfestation or spreading is sharply reduced.

To prevent the spread of such an unwelcome visitor, there are certain precautions everyone should take, especially if any member of the household has been exposed to someone with lice or is known to have lice.

These measures include not using

other people's combs, brushes, hats, scarves and the like, thoroughly washing hands and under fingernails daily and cleaning combs and brushes in very hot water.

It only takes one single stray hair containing nits to spread head lice, so towels and pillowcases should also not be shared.

Don't forget that old standby—the routine head check of your children's heads after overnight visits to other homes, or to be even safer, daily head checks as part of the family routine.

By using a good source of light, you can see the offending lice, says Ms. Hatcher, and with a magnifying glass, detection is faster and easier still. Common sites are the back of the head and behind the ears.

To prevent spread of existing lice, or to forestall their setting up house-keeping, Ms. Hatcher recommends washing all washable items in hot water (130 degrees is usually recommended) and drying on high heat (at least 20 minutes is usually recommended). Heat is lethal to lice.

Floors, carpets, upholstered furniture and mattresses should be vacuumed, and the bag discarded after use.

Household furniture can be

sprayed with a non-staining lice control spray available at drug stores.

Children's stuffed animals should be washed if possible, and if not, stored at least two weeks in an airtight plastic bag.

Treatment Is Simple

If an infestation is found, treatment is less drastic and less painful

than it was in earlier years. Kerosene, head shaving and olive oil were routine approaches used by previous generations.

Today, special over the counter shampoos can be bought at the drugstore. Prescription medication is available as well.

On request, the county health department can issue a medicated

cream rinse, free of chemicals, which should be used after shampooing.

"This is an excellent rinse and method of controlling this yearly menace, so if you see or suspect head lice on your or any member of your family," she says, call the health department. Clinic hours are Mon. through Fri., 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. to 4 p.m.

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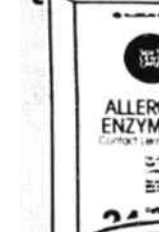
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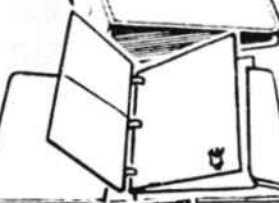
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