

# Heading off head lice

Scratching your head over how to get rid of head lice? This pesky parasite is contagious and most commonly seen in children age three to 11 and their families. Personal hygiene makes no difference when it comes to head lice – even the cleanest kid in school can end up with it. This time of year, when kids are wearing and sharing hats, can be a high time for head lice.

Parents are the key to looking for and treating head lice. They should spend 15 minutes each week on each child carefully looking for head lice or nits. Children in childcare, preschools, grade and middle school are at risk because head lice will spread as long as children play together. Early detection and treatment is the key to getting rid of head lice.

Symptoms to watch for are a tickling feeling in the hair, frequent itching and sores from scratching. Lice live in a person's hair and lay eggs, called nits, on the hair shaft. Both the louse (the adult lice) and eggs are very small and difficult to spot. They are most easily seen around the ears and by the neckline.

If someone you know gets head lice, it's a good idea to follow a few precautions:

- Check your child and playmates, and family members for head lice immediately
- Avoid sharing hats or anything worn near the head
- Don't share combs, brushes, barrettes or any type of hair accessories
- If sleeping away from home, use your own pillow and sleeping bag

The most important thing to do, if a person discovers they have head lice, is to treat it. Lice can live on a person for up to 30 days and can lay several eggs every day during their life span. Head lice can be treated with an over the counter or prescription medication. A 14-day treatment is recommended by the Iowa Department of Public Health. Begin by writing down the date you first noticed the head lice. Wash the person's head with medicated shampoo, being careful to follow all the instructions. For the next six days, wash the hair using regular shampoo and conditioner. Comb the hair from the scalp to the end of the hair, wiping the comb between each stroke with a paper towel. This process removes any lice or nits. Keep the hair wet while combing and spend at least 15 to 20 minutes combing the hair. On the eighth day of treatment, use the medicated shampoo to wash the hair again. Then follow the same process from the previous week for days nine through 14, washing and conditioning hair and then combing through carefully.

The lice aren't able to survive once they fall off a person, but doing a few follow up cleaning activities will help prevent a repeat infestation. Use the washing machine to clean all the washable bedding and clothes the infested person slept on or wore in the last few days, and dry clean items that are not washable. Another option is to put all the clothes, toys and bedding in a plastic bag, seal and keep closed for two weeks. All combs and brushes should soak in hot, soapy water (130 degrees), rubbing alcohol or Lysol for an hour. Vacuum the floor and furniture, but avoid using fumigation sprays. These can be toxic if they are absorbed through the skin or inhaled.

This season of the year leads us to many of the communicable diseases such as head lice, flu, common cold, and pink eye. For many of these diseases, PREVENTION is the key. Hand washing is the number one key to prevention. No sharing of food utensils such as glasses or water bottles, or clothing articles, such as hats, caps, stocking caps, and scarves, will also help reduce the incidence of communicable diseases.

Unfortunately, no magic cure has been found for these diseases. Yet most of them are not life threatening but are uncomfortable irritating nuisances. Let's all work together and keep our children healthy!