Head Lice (Pediculosis Capitis)

What are head lice?

- Small, tan-colored insects (less than ⅛" long) that
  - ~ Live on blood they draw from the scalp.
  - ~ Crawl (they do not hop or fly).
  - ~ Deposit tiny, gray/white eggs known as *nits* on a hair shaft 3 to 4 mm from the scalp because the eggs need the warmth from the scalp for hatching.
  - ~ Can live only 1 to 2 days away from the scalp.
- Having an infestation with lice may cause irritation and scratching with secondary skin infection.
- Families and caregivers/teachers often get very upset about lice; however, lice do not cause disease. Head lice infestations occur in all socioeconomic groups and do not represent poor hygiene.
- Often, normal activities are disrupted because of excessive reaction to these insect pests.

What are the signs or symptoms?

- Itching of skin where lice feed on the scalp or neck.
- Nits may be glued to hair, commonly behind ears and at or near the nape of the neck.
- Scratching, especially behind and around ears and at the nape of the neck.
- Open sores and crusting from secondary bacterial infection that may be associated with swollen lymph nodes (commonly called *swollen glands*).

What are the incubation and contagious periods?

- Incubation period: 6 to 10 days from laying to hatching of eggs.
  - ~ Lice can reproduce 2 to 3 weeks after hatching.
- Contagious period: Until treated with a chemical that kills lice and viable eggs have been killed or removed.

How are they spread?

- Direct contact with hair or head gear of infected people
- Storing or sharing combs, brushes, hats, blankets, or sheets
- Can spread only by crawling lice (not nits)

How do you control them?

- Pesticides that kill lice and most viable eggs are available. Resistance of lice and nits to these chemicals has been reported, but the extent of resistance to the chemicals is not known. Repeated use of the recommended treatment chemicals to get rid of lice may be more of a safety risk than lice themselves. Most of these chemicals are potentially toxic with repeated use or misuse.

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Child with nits on hair behind ears and at nape of neck

- None of the suggested remedies using common household products (eg, salad oils, mayonnaise, petroleum jelly) or chemicals intended for other purposes have been shown to be effective. Some that have been tried (eg, kerosene) are very dangerous.
- Mechanical removal of the lice and nits by combing them out with a special fine-tooth comb is tedious and very time consuming. Although such combing is not necessary after using a recommended pediculicide chemical, it helps find lice in the hair and removes the dead nits so that reinfestation of a treated child is easier to detect.
- Examine the heads of household and close contacts using special lice combs, available from drug stores and on the Internet, or use small flat wooden sticks to separate the hair (eg, Popsicle sticks or tongue depressors).
- Articles that may have been contaminated should be laundered so that the fabric is exposed to a temperature of 130°F. Using hot water in a washer and drying on the hot setting kills lice in bedding and clothing. Dry-cleaning clothing and bedding also is effective.
- Toys, personal articles, bedding, other fabrics, and upholstered furniture that cannot be laundered with hot water and a dryer or dry-cleaned can be kept in a plastic bag for 10 days if there is concern about lice having crawled from an infested child onto these articles.
- Because head lice can only live for 1 to 2 days away from the scalp, chemical treatment of the environment is not necessary. Vacuum floors, carpets, mattresses, and furniture (a safe alternative to spraying).

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