HEAD LICE

What are they?

Lice are small wingless insects which can live on the human scalp and lay their eggs there, attached to the hair.

What are the symptoms?

Usually there are no symptoms at all. You may notice black dots (lice droppings) on your clothes or white dots (empty nit shells after the eggs have hatched) in your hair. Your scalp may be itchy.

Are they infectious?

Yes. They can be passed from person to person by head to head contact, eg in bed, during play etc. Relatively prolonged contact is needed (at least 30 to 60 seconds), for a louse to move across to another head. They move to clean heads as readily as to dirty ones and to short hair more readily than long.

How can you tell if you have them?

You can buy a fine toothcomb from the chemist and by running the comb through wet hair, look for evidence such as:

- lice (flesh coloured insects about 3mm long)
- live eggs (very small, dull and flesh coloured, cemented just above the roots of individual hairs)
- old shells or nits (white and shiny harmless shells found away from the scalp which are signs of past infection).

Is there any treatment?

Only cases where live lice have been found should be treated.

1. Lotions (not shampoo) can be bought from the chemist or prescribed by the GP. They will advise which preparation is currently recommended. It is important to follow the instructions on the bottle carefully, and to check it has been effective by wet combing following treatment. Sometimes the eggs are not penetrated and hatch out a few days later and so the same lotion should be repeated 7 days after the first application. It is also important to check all the family and close contacts at the same time and treat those found with head lice. Asthmatics and those with skin problems such as eczema should use water-based lotions. Pregnant and breast feeding mothers and children under 6 months should be treated under medical supervision.

2. An equally effective treatment is to remove the lice by regular combing of wet conditioned hair using a fine toothcomb. This is repeated every 3 days for 2 weeks, removing the lice through their life cycle. More information is available from the School Nurse, Control of Infection Nurse, or Bug Buster Helpline - 0131 341 7167.

How soon can you return to school or work?

As soon as the lotion has been used, or after the first combing with the Bug Busting method.

August 1999
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