

The Common Issue of Head Lice

Pediculus humanus capitis, is the scientific name for lice and we call *Pediculosis* the affection of lice. It is a parasitic insect that can be found on the head, eyebrows, and eyelashes of people. Its main feed is the human blood and they live close to the human scalp staying attached on the hair.



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Head lice are spread via direct contact with the hair from an infected person so they cannot hop or fly. Those at greatest risk have had head to head contact or comes close to an infected individual. Whilst uncommon, sharing clothing is also a risk such as hats, scarves, coats, combs, brushes, or towels used by an infected person. Lice cannot live more than 24 hours out, but there is a high probability of catching an infection.

Head lice mostly proliferate in the school and educational activity settings, due to the greater number of children concentrated in each classroom or playground and the longer contact time. Head lice can become a cause of bullying or harassment in school, since the population erroneously associates this condition with a hygiene problem or social class.

It is generally agreed that in children head lice are not related to hygiene, however it might be in adults. Adults and children who do not attend a school setting may also be infected in other situations, especially throughout the global family. In general, it can be stated that the household - understood as the group of people that constitute a family group - is the maintenance of the disease and the school is the propagation medium.

Clinically, head lice can be asymptomatic. The pruritus is the most common symptom. Furthermore, this can sometimes prove to be so intense that, when scratched, it causes erosions in the skin and subsequent bacterial infections. In this situation, the scalp is suffering and in need of treatment. Fundamentally, the control of the pediculosis is the healing of each infected individual

that is part of the affected social group, through the total elimination of all living phases of lice. This is achieved by treating individually using chemical pediculicides or other extraction and disposal techniques.

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However, the eradication or elimination of local outbreaks and therefore of possible epidemics, requires measures that are more complex. The health and care information as to how to do this is freely made available through the education and awareness of schoolchildren, parents and educators. A child infected with lice scratches their head and when parents start getting alerts from the school informing them that it has been diagnosed, some of their classmates often panic. This can cause tremendous disruption within the household as parents must, every night, check everyone's hair including their own, meticulously combing and treating. This can take up to 2-3 hours per night. In addition, those within the household who also suffer from other conditions may find it additionally stressful. Parents must take the risk that once their child's headlice has cleared up, there is a high risk of re-infection once they return to school and so in this regard, head lice are a common, repetitive cause for concern.

Currently there are many products, such as shampoos, lotions and creams, designed specifically to combat lice. However, it must be borne in mind that they are products with an insecticidal action and they must be used scrupulously following the instructions on the package insert for them to be effective. If the lice is still resist treatment, it is possible to resort to oral treatments.

At the end of any treatment, it will be necessary to remove the remaining nits with a fine-toothed comb and maintain the use of the antiparasitic shampoo or lotion for some time. For children under two years of age, this type of product should not be used and it is best to remove nits and lice by hand, combing through wet hair with a fine-toothed pin. It will be necessary to repeat the operation, with intervals of two or three days, for at least for two weeks after having seen the last louse.

Consequently, having children at home with lice is often an anguish for many, since treatment and maintenance is a tedious processes in the family nucleus.