

The Unwelcome Resurgence of Head Lice

As any parent who has dealt with a head lice breakout in kids can attest, it is an unpleasant experience.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, head lice are tiny insects that do not cause serious illness, but can be spread from person to person through prolonged head-to-head contact. They also require treatment to eradicate them from your child's hair shafts.

Head lice during the pandemic: A look at two trends

When COVID-19 shut down schools and many kid activities, head lice activity and spread slowed down significantly. According to a 2021 study of 1,118 children who were analyzed both before the pandemic and during the lockdown in Buenos Aires, the overall prevalence of lice decreased by more than 25%.

However, the results were not universal when it came to lice activity during 2020. According to a July 2020 report from Lice Clinics of America, they saw an average increase of 25% in lice activity from April to May 2020.

It appears that the majority of this surge was due to family members spreading it to one another while in close contact sheltering at home. What's more, the organization reported that many of the outbreaks were more severe than usual, likely also due to the prolonged exposure of infected individuals to one another.

The bugs are back

Regardless of the conflicting evidence about head lice during 2020, indications show that infections have now returned to their pre-lockdown levels. A lice-tracking map from the company Nix shows that infections are surging in Alabama, Houston, New Mexico, and several other areas across the United States.

How to deal with head lice

As the risks of head lice infections rise, parents need to resume their usual vigilance of identifying an infection.

"A very good way to prevent head lice is to keep long hair tightened in a ponytail or a braid," says Antonella Tosti, M.D., a dermatologist with the University of Miami Health System. "When it comes to identifying an infection, itching is a very important sign. Sometimes parents overlook this symptom. There are not many other causes of scalp itch in childhood."

If your child does have head lice, it isn't the end of the world. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 6 to 12 million infestations occur every year in American children ages 3 to 11. However, it is critical to treat hair with medicine to end the infection and prevent the head lice from returning. Many over-the-counter treatments are available. Or you can visit your health care provider for further guidance.

"You need to treat the hair and scalp with a head lice treatment (topical permethrin is the gold standard)," says Dr. Tosti. "Then, you need to remove the lice eggs, known as nits, using a fine-tooth comb, as the eggs are not killed by the treatment."

Once a child has received a head lice treatment, then it is safe to return to school.

In addition to following the treatment instructions provided with the medication (it may require a few treatments), the American Academy of Family Physicians recommends that you wash clothes and anything else that the child touched in plenty of hot water. Then, thoroughly vacuum items that cannot be washed, such as couches, carpets, or car seats.

Head lice are an annoying but common problem for millions of American families. But, you can destroy them with a bit of persistence - without causing any harm to you or your loved ones.

Wyatt Myers is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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