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Ludworth Primary School

Moor Crescent

Ludworth

Durham

DH6 1LZ

Telephone: 01429 820207

Fax: 01429 820207

E-Mail: ludworth@durhamlearning.net

Website: ludworthprimaryschool.co.uk

Headteacher: Mrs J Sones

HEAD LICE INFORMATION

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny insects which live in the hair and feed by biting the scalp and sucking blood. The female head louse lays her eggs close to the scalp where it is warm enough to incubate them. The eggs, or nits, hatch out, start feeding and soon begin to lay more eggs. Empty egg shells are left attached to the hair when the louse hatches.

How are they transmitted?

Head lice cannot fly, jump or swim but spread by clambering from head to head. They are caught by head-to-head contact with someone who already has them. Although anyone can catch them, they prefer the heads of four- to 11-year-olds. Clean hair is no protection against them. When heads touch, the lice simply walk from one head to another. Adult lice take every opportunity to exchange hosts to avoid extinction through in-breeding.

Shared brushes and combs can also transmit lice so parents and schools should discourage children from sharing combs and brushes. Shared hats, headphones and jackets hung close together do not, however, present a risk. This is because head lice that involuntarily fall off the head or clamber on to clothes or other articles, such as pillows or cuddly toys, are dying and harmless.

What are the signs of head lice infestation?

The way head lice feed causes itching, so scratching the scalp is usually the first sign that a child has head lice. It should be pointed out that the onset of itching may be delayed by weeks, or even months, when someone first catches lice. Another sign of head lice may be a rash on the base of the neck caused by lice droppings. Anyone who has had head lice for a while may begin to feel generally unwell or 'lousy'.

How are head lice detected?

Lice are most easily detected by combing really well conditioned soaking wet hair with a fine-tooth comb. Really wet lice stay still and cannot escape. Combing dry or damp hair with a fine-tooth comb is not a reliable way to detect lice. In dry or damp hair, lice move quickly away from the disturbance caused by a comb. Regular head inspections in school, therefore, are of dubious value because only the most severe cases are likely to be detected. Many milder cases will be overlooked, thus lulling parents and schools into a false sense of security.

What is the treatment?

There are two main methods of dealing with a head lice infestation: wet combing and use of insecticidal lotions. Whichever option is chosen, it is important to recognise that neither will protect against re-infection.

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Use of insecticidal lotions

Do not use lotions unless live lice have been found. Check all close family/friends by the 'wet combing' method described below. If using a lotion, follow the instructions on the product packet and make sure you have enough lotion to treat all those who may be affected. The lotion used may be capable of killing eggs as well as lice, but there is no certainty of this. Check for baby lice hatching out from eggs three to five days after you use it and again at ten to 12 days. If the lice appear to be unaffected by the lotion or if the problem persists, you should take advice from your local school nurse, health visitor, pharmacist or GP. You should seek advice where whoever is being treated is under one year of age, suffers from asthma or allergies, or is pregnant or breast feeding.

Wet combing or 'bug busting' method

The 'bug busting' method is an alternative method, devised by the charity Community Hygiene Concern, which avoids the use of insecticides. It aims at systematic removal of live lice by combing through the hair and physically removing any lice found.

After washing the hair, copious amounts of conditioner should be applied and, after detangling with an ordinary wide-tooth comb. With the person sitting upright or leaning over the bath, comb the hair from the roots using a special 'bug buster' fine-tooth comb, with the teeth of the comb slotting into the hair at the roots with every stroke. After each stroke, the lice should be cleared from the comb.

Wet lice find it difficult to escape from this combing. It is hard for them to keep a grip on hair which is slippery with conditioner, and so removal with the comb is easier. The lice should then be wiped on to kitchen paper and disposed of, or simply rinsed away.

This routine should be repeated every three to four days for two weeks so that any lice emerging from the eggs are removed before they can spread. Given that head lice do not lay eggs until about a week after they have hatched, it follows that removing the live lice regularly will result in lice-free children in a fortnight. Re-infection can, of course, occur if head-to-head contact is subsequently made with someone with head lice. Bug buster kits, containing instruction leaflets, five combs (a de-tangler comb and combs for removing baby and adult live and empty shells) and a plastic cape, are re-usable, and are available from some local chemists or from Community Hygiene Concern (see contact details below).

You cannot prevent head lice

There is nothing you can do to prevent head lice. You can help stop them spreading by wet or dry combing regularly to catch them early. Do not use medical lotions or sprays to prevent head lice. They can irritate the scalp. There is no need for children to stay off school or to wash laundry on a hot wash.

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Further advice and help

Community Hygiene Concern

Advice helpline: 01908 561928

chc.org

Public Health England information on head lice is available at: gov.uk/guidance/headlice-pediculosis

NHS information on head lice is available <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/head-lice-and-nits/>

