



Head Lice Prevention Month

By Dr. Chris Rogge, Pharm.D.

September has arrived and kids will be heading back to soon. This week I'll be discussing head lice, a common problem that many families will be dealing with in the next few months. Head lice are the second most communicable disease among young schoolchildren behind only the common cold. The CDC estimates that there are approximately 12 million infestations each year among children between the ages of three and eleven.

A louse is a tiny, wingless, parasitic insect that feeds on blood. Lice live only on humans and cannot survive on dogs, cats, or other pets. They are transferred from person to person usually through direct head-to-head contact. Sometimes lice are transferred via hats, combs, barrettes, or headphones. Rarely they are also transferred via pillows, towels, or blankets. Personal hygiene does not affect the chances of getting head lice.

The main symptom of an infestation is an intense itching of the scalp and neck. A child's scalp should be visual inspected to confirm an infestation. Lice eggs or "nits" are firmly attached to hair shafts within a quarter inch of the scalp. They are small (0.3 mm by 0.8 mm) ovals usually yellow or white in color. Nits found more than a quarter inch from the scalp are usually already hatched. Adult lice are comparable in size to a sesame seed and are a grayish white or tan color. Adults move quickly and avoid light, which can make them difficult to find. Wetting the hair and using a fine-toothed comb and magnifying glass will help. Because nits are easily confused with dandruff or dirt the best diagnosis is to find a live adult. If no adults or viable nits (within a quarter inch of the scalp) are found treatment is not recommended.

There are two over-the-counter treatment options for head lice, permethrin (Nix) and pyrethrins (Rid). The products are fairly similar and have comparable success rates. They are both derived from chemicals found in chrysanthemums, as such people with allergies to mums or ragweed should not use either product. When using these products follow the instructions on the box carefully. The general procedure is to first wash the hair with regular shampoo (no conditioner) and towel dry. Apply the medication to saturate the hair and scalp. After 10 minutes rinse with water, then comb with the lice comb included in the box. Do NOT wash hair for 1-2 days following treatment. While both permethrin and pyrethrins usually kill adult lice, neither reliably kills louse eggs, which hatch roughly seven days after being laid. It takes newly hatched females another week to develop the ability to lay eggs. Consequently it is generally necessary to retreat

7-10 days after the first treatment. This is especially important if using pyrethrins.

Frequently everyone in the household will need to be treated. In recent years there has been an increase in resistance to these drugs. If lice persist after two treatments individuals should see their health provider for a prescription treatment such as Ovide.

In addition to using one of these products, there are a couple other things that can be done to increase success rates. Wash all bedding, clothing, and personal items (like stuffed animals and combs) used within three or four days of treatment with hot water. Items that can't be washed can be sealed in plastic bags two weeks. Vacuum the house and furniture.

Thanks for tuning in to this weeks podcast if you have any questions please stop by the store.

References

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