

Children's Health

In this article, I discuss children's health and some common childhood conditions

Head lice

Head lice get more common as children return to school. The lice are small wingless insects that feed on blood obtained by biting the scalp. These bites tend to be itchy and this itchiness is caused by an allergy to the lice. Head lice are transferred by close hair-to-hair contact. They cannot jump, fly or swim, but walk from one hair to another. It is a misconception that head lice infestation is as a result of dirty hair and poor hygiene. Head lice can be found in all hair types, long or short, and in hair of any condition.

Prevention

There is no way of guaranteeing your child won't get head lice but checking yours and your family's hair and scalp regularly is important. If your child has long hair, tie it back as this helps to reduce the likelihood of contact between their hair and that of an infected child. Regular combing of hair using the "wet combing" method can help with early detection as well as treatment. Repellents can help to prevent head lice. The repellent we recommend in Whelehans is Lyclear[®] Repellent.

Treatment

Wet Combing Method

Wet combing, is used to remove lice without using chemical treatments. Nit combs used for wet combing are available in pharmacies. This method is helpful because head lice are growing increasingly resistant to the insecticides used to remove them. The steps to follow for wet combing are to wash the hair as normal using an ordinary shampoo, apply conditioner liberally to wet hair (this causes lice to lose their grip on hair), comb the hair through with a normal comb first. Then with a fine tooth nit comb, comb from the roots along the complete length of the hair and after each stroke check the comb for lice and wipe it clean. Work methodically over the whole head for at least 30 minutes. Rinse the hair as normal. Repeat every three days for at least two weeks.

Medicated lotion or rinse

Only use a lotion if you find a living (moving) head louse. Apply the preparation according to instructions, and remove the lice and eggs with a fine-toothed nit comb. Treatment should only be done once and then repeated seven days later. Water based treatments (e.g. Derbac M[®]) are safer to use for asthmatics, patients with eczema, pregnant women and babies. There is no need to wash clothing, or bedding, if they have come into contact with head lice. This is because head lice quickly die without a host to provide warmth and food. Most treatments can only be used on children over two, however Derbac M[®] & Lyclear[®] Crème Rinse is safe for children over 6 months.

New products

Lyclear[®] brought out two new products in 2010 which contain no pesticides. Lyclear[®] Mousse comes with a fine tooth nit comb and treatment only takes 10 minutes. Lyclear[®] Spray also comes with a fine tooth nit comb and treatment only takes 15 minutes.

Electronic lice comb

RobiComb[®] is an electronic lice comb available in Whelehans. It effectively detects and kills lice without the need for chemicals.

Coughs

There is no vaccination against coughs and colds. They are caused by common viruses which are commonly passed from child to child in school. While rarely serious, coughs and colds are an inconvenience and lead to many missed school days. Some prevention tips help prevent coughs and colds. Examples include ensuring your child wash their hands regularly and properly, especially after touching their nose or mouth and before handling food. Teach them to always sneeze and cough into tissues prevent spreading infection. Sharing unwashed cups and utensils is another common way to pick up colds and flu. Chesty coughs are especially common this time of year. An antibiotic is rarely needed. Only 20% of chest infections are bacterial (green phlegm is a sign) so antibiotics are ineffective in the majority of cases. Whelehans Chesty Cough mixture has an expectorant which loosens and thins phlegm, so it is very effective at clearing a chesty cough. Just ask our staff for a more comprehensive information sheet on coughs.

Omega 3 fish Oils

Fish oil is recommended for a healthy diet because it contains the omega-3 fatty acids, eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). EPA aids emotional health and reduces stress levels while DHA aids memory and concentration.

Irish people eat less than fish than many other nationalities so supplementing on Omega 3 can be beneficial. MorEPA[®] capsules are suitable for teenagers and adults. They are tasty and chewable. This makes them suitable for people who do not like the fishy taste of normal fish oil capsules, or for people who have difficulty swallowing pills. MorEPA[®] is the richest and purest source of Omega 3 EPA & DHA fish oil you can buy.

MorEPA Mini[®] is a strawberry flavour omega 3 supplement for children from age five upwards. It can be mixed with food and drinks such as yogurt and fruit juices. At Whelehans Pharmacy, we recommend it for students of all ages to support concentration and learning ability and to help maintain a healthy immune system. Research has shown that students who took MorEPA[®] fish oils were able to perform better at mental tasks. There is no conclusive evidence, but Omega-3 supplementation is thought to be beneficial in preventing Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a condition that affects 3-5% of children. You can ask our staff for a more comprehensive information sheet on Omega 3 fish oils.

Iron Deficiency

We need iron for many important body functions, the most important of which is the manufacture of haemoglobin, the oxygen-carrying protein in our blood. Our bone marrow combines iron with proteins to make haemoglobin.

When iron levels are low; the production of red blood cells in our bone marrow slows down and the bone marrow produces small red blood cells that don't contain enough haemoglobin. These red blood cells do not carry enough oxygen to organs and tissues. This leads to the symptoms of anaemia such as lack of energy and poor concentration. Babies, teenagers and women (especially women with heavy periods) are more likely to suffer from iron-deficiency anaemia.

Why do children and teenagers need more iron?

Children and teenagers often experience rapid growth spurts which make them more prone to iron deficiency. During a growth spurt, they have a greater need of all types of nutrients including iron; therefore a nutritious, balanced and healthy diet is particularly important.

After puberty, girls are more prone to iron deficiency anaemia due to menstruation so girls need more iron to compensate for blood lost during periods. Unfortunately teenage girls are more likely to go on diets leading to iron deficiency as well as other negative effects on their health. Many teenagers decide to become vegetarian or vegan. Vegetarians are more at risk of iron deficiency anaemia than meat eaters. Red meat is the richest and best source of iron. Although there is iron in grains, vegetables fruit and nuts, there is less than is found in meat and the iron contained in these food sources are not as readily absorbed as the iron in meat.

Probably the most common cause of iron deficiency in kids and teenagers is fussy eating. Many do not like fruit and veg. A diet consisting primarily of pizza, pasta and chips, etc without much fruit and veg will lead to a deficiency of iron and many other essential vitamins and minerals.

Symptoms of iron deficiency anaemia

The more common symptoms of iron-deficiency anaemia include feeling breathless after only very little exercise, tiredness, palpitations (the sensation of feeling the heartbeat thumping in the chest), a rapid pulse and a pale skin colour.

These symptoms are not always due to iron-deficiency anaemia so if your child suffers from any of these symptoms I would advise firstly getting a haemoglobin check and if this is normal I would advise a full blood test from your GP. Whelehans now have an in-store haemoglobin check. You do not need to make an appointment to get your haemoglobin checked with us. The test is quick (only takes 2 minutes), results are instant and it is inexpensive (now only €5).

How to ensure your child gets enough iron in their diet?

Meats, especially liver, followed by beef are the best sources of iron. Most seafood are also good sources of iron.

Vegetables and fruit with the highest levels of iron are sundried tomatoes (9mg per 100g), dried apricots (6mg per 100g), fresh parsley (6mg per 100g), cooked spinach (3.5mg per 100g), coconut (3.3mg per 100g), olives (3.3mg per 100g) and raisins (3mg per 100g).

Vitamin C helps the body to absorb iron. Thus, eating fruits or vegetables high in vitamin C in addition to those high in iron helps make the iron foods more effective. Good sources of vitamin C include peppers, sweet potatoes, oranges and kiwi fruit. Some drinks reduce the absorption of iron from the digestive tract. Phosphates found in carbonated soft drinks can decrease iron absorption. Tea and coffee contain polyphenols which bind to iron and make it harder to absorb. Children and teenagers prone to iron deficiency should cut down on fizzy drinks, tea and coffee. It is very unlikely to overdose on iron from diet alone. If your child's iron levels are still low you can try a supplement which contains iron such as Whelehans Traditional Tonic. Always check with your pharmacist before starting your child on an iron supplement as too much iron can be harmful. Whelehans Traditional Tonic is especially beneficial for children who don't eat enough fruit and veg as it contains B vitamins as well as iron which can be lacking when a child doesn't eat enough fruit and veg.

Fruit and Vegetables

Fruit and vegetables are a good source of vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre. Including more fruit and vegetables as part of a balanced diet will help your children grow and develop, improve vitality and help prevent a range of chronic diseases such as Type 2 Diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and cancer in later life. It can be notoriously difficult to get some kids to eat the recommended "five a day" of fruit and veg. Research has shown that the more fruit and vegetables are available and easily accessible for children, the more likely they are to eat them. Therefore if fruit is chopped up and ready to eat, children will eat more of them. Providing a variety of different fruits and vegetables is one way to encourage your children towards healthy eating habits, however you must be patient. There is some evidence that children need to try new fruits and vegetables up to eight or nine times before they are liked or accepted. Being creative in the way you serve up fruit and vegetables can help. For example, prepare vegetables in different ways to vary the texture such as raw, microwaved, mashed, baked, grated into a casserole, blended up as a pasta sauce or as a soup. Fruit juice is often regarded as a healthy choice as it contains Vitamin C. However one small glass (125 ml) of most juices provides a child's daily requirement for Vitamin C. More than this provides excess sugar and calories that can lead to weight gain. A piece of fruit is a better choice than juice.

Vitamin and mineral supplements should not be considered an alternative to a healthy diet. However, Whelehans Children's Tonic is a good option for those kids who won't eat enough fruit and veg. It is a natural tonic containing all the B vitamins and iron which may be lacking in kids not fond of fruit and veg. It can help ensure they remain healthy during school term.

Food allergies in children

Since 1990, there has been a 500 per cent increase in hospital admissions for food allergies among the young. The most frequent food allergies in children are to milk, eggs, soya, wheat, fish, nuts, citrus fruit and tomatoes.

Food allergies are more common in children than adults. According to a study done by the Food Safety Agency in the UK in 2008, it was estimated that 5 to 8% of children and 1 to 2% of adults suffered from a food allergy.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of food allergy; an immediate type of allergy and a delayed type of allergy. With immediate type allergies, you notice a reaction very quickly after you eat the offending food, usually within a few minutes. Symptoms include hives, itchiness and swelling and in extreme cases, a potentially life-threatening allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. An adrenaline injection is normally the treatment of choice for anaphylaxis.

The adrenaline device used in children is called an Anapen[®] Junior device and must be prescribed by the child's GP. The GP, practice nurse or pharmacist can demonstrate how to use the device.

Delayed-type allergies are more subtle and more difficult to detect. This is because it is the chronic build-up of a particular food that causes the allergic reaction. In young children, the most common delayed type of food allergy is to milk protein, which causes chronic symptoms such as eczema, reflux, colic and diarrhoea. This should not to be confused with lactose intolerance, which does not involve the immune system. Delayed-type allergies are difficult for doctors to diagnose because there's no obvious relationship between eating the food and the onset of symptoms. Because of the fact that these symptoms are also common in children without allergies makes a diagnosis

even more difficult.

Most children outgrow food allergies such as milk, eggs, soya and wheat by the time that they start school. However an estimated 80% of children with peanut allergies remain allergic to peanuts for the rest of their life. There is currently no cure for food allergies. Treatment involves identifying the specific food that triggers the allergic reaction and then avoiding it. If the child inadvertently eats the food that causes the allergy, an over the counter antihistamine such as Zirtek[®] liquid can be given to the child to reduce symptoms such as an itch and hives.

Food allergy or intolerance?

Food allergies and food intolerances are different but they are often confused. About 2 of a 100 people have a food allergy but many more have food intolerances. Food intolerance is an adverse reaction to a particular food or ingredient, which occurs every time the food is eaten. It's often confused with a food allergy, but it's very different because the immune system isn't activated.

Food intolerance in children

Food intolerance is more common than food allergies. It can occur in adults and children. It occurs when the body is unable to deal with a certain food. This is generally because the affected person lacks enough of the particular chemical or enzyme that is needed for digestion of that food.

One of the most common types is intolerance of cow's milk, which contains a type of sugar called lactose. Many people have a shortage of the enzyme lactase, which is normally made by cells lining the small intestine. Without this enzyme, the lactose intolerant person cannot break down milk sugar into simpler forms that can be absorbed into the bloodstream.

Symptoms of lactose intolerance include indigestion, bloating, flatulence, diarrhoea and nausea. Babies are usually born with higher levels of lactase, so lactose intolerance usually only begins after the age of about two, as the body begins to produce less of the enzyme. But many people don't experience symptoms until they're much older. A temporary lactase deficiency may follow gastroenteritis, especially in children. Lactose intolerance in children and adults is sometimes misdiagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) as many of the symptoms are similar.

Some children have adverse reactions to chemical preservatives and additives in food and drinks, such as sulphites, benzoates, salicylates, monosodium glutamate, caffeine, aspartame and tartrazine.

The lack of a specific enzyme in the body may lead to the build up of toxic by-products and histamine, which then mimic the symptoms of an allergy. The symptoms of food intolerance can be similar to an allergic reaction.

Symptoms of food intolerance

Food intolerance is not immediately life-threatening, but can still leave the sufferer feeling extremely unwell. Studies show that many people notice a pattern and intuitively suspect foods. However, the symptoms may not follow immediately, sometimes only being fully felt in the following days (for example, joint pains). Frequently too, not one but a number of foods combine to cause reactions, making it hard to clearly identify the problem foods.

There are many conditions linked to food intolerance. Food intolerance is linked to many childhood conditions including asthma, ADHD, bed wetting, eczema and sleep disturbance. While many of these problems are genetic and in many cases have no link to food intolerance, there are some

cases where food intolerance exacerbates or is even the cause of the problem.

The most basic test for food intolerance is to remove the food from your diet, see if symptoms improve and then try reintroducing the food. If symptoms return, intolerance is likely. However this may not be as easy in practice as most children eat a big variety of foods as part of the modern diet so discovering the offending food may take a lot of trial and error. If you're trying out elimination of a suspected food (e.g. dairy, grains, yeast) give it at least 7-10 days of strict avoidance to judge if there's a difference.

You should not leave out foods for young children and infants without getting professional advice as the child may be losing out nutritionally, such as in the case of dairy avoidance and this could have a profound impact on their growth and development.

Food intolerance checks

You can ask your GP about food intolerance testing for your child. For example, if you suspect food intolerance, your GP may do tests to confirm diagnosis. Your GP may refer you to a specialist for these tests.

Whelehans pharmacy now does food intolerance testing in store for adults and children. Our test involves us taking a finger prick sample of blood. We can check for food intolerance to 59 of the most common causes of food intolerance. The test takes half an hour and we can have results in a few hours. Food intolerance can be a cause or exacerbating factor for many childhood conditions including asthma, ADHD, bed wetting, eczema and sleep disturbance. Ask our staff for more information on our food intolerance testing service. Ask of staff in store or call us at 04493 34591 for more details.

A nutritional therapist can help you design a nutritious diet for your child to cope with even a big list of problem foods. In Whelehan's, we can refer you to a qualified nutritional therapist if you require further help.

Treatment of food intolerance

Food intolerance can be controlled simply by cutting the offending food out of the diet. Babies or young children with lactose intolerance can be given soya milk or hypoallergenic milk formula instead of cow's milk.

Adults may be able to tolerate small amounts of troublesome foods and may need to experiment to determine what they can and can't eat. Lactase enzyme drops or capsules can be used for lactose intolerance.

It's important that if foods are excluded from the diet suitable alternatives are introduced to prevent nutrient deficiencies. A dietician or a nutritional therapist can give practical advice about how to achieve this. Speak to your GP or pharmacist to discuss any suspected food intolerances before putting a child on a restricted or elimination diet.

Perhaps food intolerance is not the problem

Even if your child is diagnosed with food intolerance it may not be the cause of their symptoms. For example, perhaps your child could be diagnosed with intolerance to citric fruit, but the real reason for their problems such as nausea and lack of energy could be stress and anxiety. It is in our nature to look for a "quick fix" to our problems, and it can be convenient to think that cutting out one food may relieve many of daily health problems. It may not be as simple as that. This is why, when getting food intolerance tests done, it is important to get them done with a medical professional

who can recognise from symptoms that food intolerance (whether diagnosed or not) may not be the only problem. We must take a holistic approach as diet is only one factor in overall wellbeing.

Eczema in Children

Eczema affects over 30 per cent of children before they reach school age and 1-3 per cent of adults in the UK. It is likely that its frequency in Ireland is similar to the UK. It is very often inherited. There is very often a link with asthma and hay fever. Eczema has become more common in recent years, the cause of this is uncertain.

Triggers include specific allergies to foods, overheating, infection, wool next to the skin, cat and dog fur, soaps, detergents, house dust mites and pollen. Extreme hot and cold, humidity, and hormonal changes in women (caused by the menstrual cycle and pregnancy) can also cause a flare-up.

Prevention

The initial approach to treatment of atopic eczema involves the avoidance of exacerbating factors and hydrating the skin. Exacerbating factors include excessive bathing, low humidity environments, dry skin, exposure to solvents and detergents and emotional stress. Avoiding these factors is beneficial for acute flare ups and long term management.

Diet

In adults, food allergies do not appear to be a factor in eczema so avoiding foods is not any benefit. In infants, avoidance of certain foods can be helpful. Common food triggers include eggs, nuts, peanut butter, chocolate, milk, seafood and soya.

Maintaining adequate skin hydration

Evaporation of water on the skin leads to dry skin in patients with eczema; skin hydration is a key component of their overall management. Lotions, which have a high water and low oil content, can worsen dry skin via evaporation and trigger a flare of the disease. However, thick creams (eg. Whelehans Intensive Moisturising Cream, Diprobase[®]) which have a low water content, or ointments (eg. petroleum jelly, Emulsifying Ointment), which have zero water content will better protect against dry skin.

Creams and ointments are best applied immediately after bathing when the skin is well hydrated. Hydration can be improved by soaking in a bath containing a bath additive such as Oilatum[®] for 10 to 20 minutes.

Urea

Urea a hydrating agent naturally found in many emollients sold over the counter in pharmacies including Calmurid[®], Eucerin[®] and Whelehans Intensive Moisturising Cream. There are markedly reduced amounts of urea in dry skin conditions. Urea is strongly hygroscopic (water-loving) and draws and retains water within skin cells. Urea softens the skin. Urea is beneficial in dry skin conditions where scaling and flaking occur and can be useful in elderly patients. It can also be used in conjunction with corticosteroids to enhance the penetration of skin. Whelehans Intensive Moisturising Cream was developed by our pharmacist in Whelehans Pharmacy because brands such as Calmurid[®] Cream, while effective, are very expensive. Our cream contains 10% urea and is over half the price of brands such as Calmurid[®] Cream.

Treatment

When skin is not inflamed, patients should bathe daily and then immediately apply a moisturiser. Children with inflamed skin may be initially treated with topical corticosteroid such as hydrocortisone 1% cream which can be prescribed by the GP.

The face and skin folds are areas that are at high risk of thinning and marking with corticosteroids so care and moderation is important. The GP may prescribe more potent corticosteroid creams such as Eumovate[®], Betnovate[®] or Dermovate[®] for short periods during bad flare ups but these should only be used for a short period of time. Children are often referred to a skin specialist in more severe cases.

When using a corticosteroid and a moisturiser, it is good practice to use the corticosteroid first and to put on the moisturiser after half an hour to allow the skin time to absorb the corticosteroid. Children who require therapy to the face or skin folds for more than three weeks should be treated with tacrolimus (Protopic[®] Ointment) rather than a topical corticosteroid by their doctor. Unlike corticosteroids, tacrolimus does not cause thinning of the skin.

Tips for parents

A moisturising cream or ointment is best applied after bathing when the water content of the skin is greatest, and at night to prevent drying. The frequency of application should be increased to at least three to four times a day when the eczema is active. For whole body application, 250g per week may be required in children and 500g in adults. In order to avoid diluting the steroid and spreading it to areas of skin where it is not required, moisturising creams should not be applied immediately after the steroid. Steroid creams and Protopic[®] ointment are best avoided in the presence of infection. When using Protopic[®] ointment, avoid exposing skin to the sun. Weepy or crusted areas are a sign of infection so you should seek treatment immediately.

Therapies with no evidence base

Supplementation with essential fatty acids, pyridoxine, vitamin E, multivitamins and zinc salts has no proven value. Reactions to washing powders are rare and avoidance of biological washing powders is of no benefit. There is no evidence that probiotics improve eczema.

Health Services for children

Whelehans has an in store chiropodist, James Pedley, every Thursday. Common conditions he treats for children include warts and verrucas, athlete's foot and ingrown toenails. There is a reduced price for medical card holders. Our food intolerance test is aimed at children and adults. Our test involves us taking a finger prick sample of blood. We can check for food intolerance to 59 of the most common causes of food intolerance. The test takes half an hour and we can have results in a few hours. Food intolerance can be a cause or exacerbating factor for many childhood conditions including asthma, ADHD, bed wetting, eczema and sleep disturbance. Ask our staff for more information on food intolerance and our food intolerance testing service. Many children, especially those who are fussy eaters can be low in iron. Low iron can cause lethargy and can lead to poor concentration and school performance in children. We can check your child's iron levels with our 2 minute haemoglobin check. You don't need to book an appointment and it costs €5.

Services we have for adults include our heart screening service. We will check you for cholesterol, diabetes, blood pressure, body mass index and percentage risk of heart disease. It will only take about 15 minutes and results are instant. Our free hearing test service with our audiologist, Tony Battersea, takes place on Mondays. Call us at 04493 34591 to book any of our clinics.

For comprehensive and free health advice and information call in to Whelehans, log on to www.whelehans.ie or dial 04493 34591. You can find us on Facebook