

Head Lice

Getting rid of them and preventive measures

These are small parasitic wingless insects that cause discomforts such as itching, sores, and a tickling feeling if they are left to roam around on the scalps of children or adults. Before we dive deeper into the story of these little miscreants, let us try to understand few things about their nature.

Head lice are parasites, meaning that they suck our blood to survive and provide nothing in return. They are obligatory parasites, meaning that they can only survive on the scalp of human beings. They are wingless with weak legs, thus they can neither fly and nor jump. Hence, for their dispersal to other human beings, close contact is essential. It makes children attending kindergarten or school more prone to head lice manifestation, as they often play in proximity to each other, frequently contacting each other's heads or scalps though mostly non-intentional.

In the language of science, head lice are called *pediculosis capitis*. What is noble about these parasites is that they do not carry or spread any disease. Though it is not true for their cousins that live on the skin (body lice). Although head lice and body lice are quite similar to each other, they are different species with separate habitats and lifestyles. It is thought that they separated from each other several thousands of years ago when humans started wearing clothes.

These insects may be tiny, but they are quite visible to our naked eyes if looked for carefully. Furthermore, one can often find the marks of their reproductive activities in the form of white remains of eggs, called nits. These small white matters (nits/eggshells of head lice) are quite visible on the hair of a person infested with them. Adult head lice mate with each other to produce multiple eggs. They usually lay eggs close to the hair shaft so that these eggs can benefit from the warmth of scalp. But head lice are smart enough to understand the temperature differences between various environments. Thus, in cold countries, they lay their eggs quite close to the scalp, while in warmer or tropical nations they lay their eggs further from the scalp. These eggs are attached to the hair with the help of strong proteinaceous glue.

Head lice have a lifespan of around 30 days, counting from the day when the egg is laid. It continues to develop within the egg for about a week. After coming out of the egg, it goes through three stages (called Nymph 1,2, and 3), before becoming an adult.

They usually feed on us a few times a day, causing an unpleasant sensation on the scalp in the process. It often forces us to scratch our scalp, thus increasing the risk of some kind of secondary infection. Hence, there is a necessity to get rid of these unwanted guests, though it is no reason to worry or panic.

Treatment and prevention of head lice manifestation

Now that we have learned about the biography of these unpleasant and unwanted parasitic guests, it is time to learn about the ways of getting rid of them, and find out the measures that can help us to resist their future attacks on our scalp.

Head lice are best eradicated with the use of a specific medicated solution that is applied on the scalp called pediculicide (medicine that kills head lice). Many kinds of such drugs are sold as over-the-counter

medicines, although some of the formulations may require a prescription from a doctor as they could be a bit toxic.

Before you start the treatment, it is essential that everyone in the family should be checked for the manifestation, with particular attention given to bedmates or siblings. Though the head lice more commonly manifest children, if they are not treated on time, it is not uncommon for adults to get manifested by this parasite as well.

When buying medicine for head lice, it is essential to know whether it kills both the adults and the eggs or only the adults. Many over-the-counter drugs or solutions for killing these parasites are not good at destroying the eggs. Thus in most cases, medication has to be repeatedly applied after a week or ten days.

After repeated use of the medications, one must inspect the scalp to make sure that none of the living head lice is seen moving.

Special combs come either in a pack of medicine or are sold separately, and they can also help to get rid of dead lice, eggs, and nits.

Once these creatures have been eradicated from the scalp of the person, it is time to make sure that none of them exist in the surrounding environment. Head lice are very sensitive to temperature, and its eggs or adults cannot survive for more than five minutes at a temperature higher than 53.5 degrees Celsius (130° F). Thus, soak the combs and brushes in hot water for 5-10 minutes, and wash all the clothes in the washing machine at the maximum temperature that is safe for the clothes. Further, clean the house properly with a vacuum cleaner.

It is essential to understand that the risk of reinfection from lice that have fallen on furniture or the carpet is almost nil. Moreover, they cannot survive outside of the scalp for more than a couple of days due to lack of food and optimal temperature. Thus, there is no need to spend extra money on some expensive house cleaning activities.

Never use fumigating, toxic sprays or similar substances, as these can do more harm than good.

To prevent future manifestations, tell your children about lice and ask them to avoid contact with the heads of other children while playing.

About the author:

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Dr. Preet is a family physician. He has been practicing medicine for last 15 years and often sees children with various manifestation in his day to day practice. Head lice manifestation is not rare in children. He is also a passionate writer.

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