

Pediculosis (Head Lice) in the School Community

The goals of providing a healthy and safe environment for students with head lice are to:

- Maximize academic performance
- Minimize absence due to unnecessary exclusion of students with head lice

Until a few years ago, approaches to head lice were based on old wives tales, misconceptions and marketing departments from companies who made products for profit from Head Lice Hysteria. Luckily, we now have research upon which to base our practice. Thank you, American Academy of Pediatrics, Harvard School of Public Health and the Center for Disease Control.

The following are some surprising things that you may not know about head lice:

- Head lice are insects about the size of a sesame seed. They live on the human scalp and lay eggs, called nits, on the hair shaft. The nits are tiny whitish eggs that are shaped like a teardrop, about the size of a poppy seed. Nits are attached to the hair shaft with a glue-like substance. Although nits may resemble dandruff, they will not wash, shake or blow away like dandruff. The nits hatch in about a week, mature in 7-10 days, and then begin to produce eggs. Head lice are found most frequently around the nape of the neck or behind the ears.
- When found, most cases of head lice are more than a month old and pose little risk to others.
- Head lice are not a health hazard or a sign of uncleanliness. In fact, they love clean hair because it is easier to latch on.
- Lice are never a source of infection or disease. They are simply a nuisance.
- Lice do not hop, jump or fly – they crawl. The only way they can get from one person to another is direct touching of heads.
- Indirect spread through contact with personal belongings of an infested individual (combs, brushes, hats) is much less likely. Lice found on combs, brushes, hats etc. are likely to be injured or dead and a healthy louse is not likely to leave a healthy head. There is no need to separate or bag hats, coats, book bags in school.
- Head Lice cannot live on animals.
- Lice usually survive for less than a day away from the human scalp at normal room temperature. They cannot survive without blood, that is why they bite.
- Itching is the most common symptom. Generally, there is a red itchy rash on the back of the neck, just below the hairline.
- Only those with live lice and viable eggs should be treated. In general, nits found more than 1 cm from the scalp are **not** likely to be viable. Head lice products are pesticides, which are toxic if overused, and can be absorbed through the skin. Directions should be followed carefully. Never treat a child who does not have lice as a preventative measure. **CALL YOUR DOCTOR FOR ADVICE**.
- Removing the nit (eggs) and live lice with a comb is time consuming but the most effective way to get rid of them. They do not **wash** out.
- Washing and drying (with heat) the pillowcases, sheets, nightclothes, towels and stuffed animals may possibly eliminate lice and eggs that might otherwise reinfest a family member. Combs, brushes, hats and other hair accessories in contact with an infested person should be washed in hot water each day to dislodge any lice and nits.
- Schools are not the most common places where head lice are spread, even though schools have been blamed in the past. Sleepovers among friends and relatives are thought to be a common way that they are passed home to home.
- School wide head checks are not recommended or endorsed by the Harvard School of Public Health, the American Association of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control, or the National Association of School Nurses.
- “No-nit” policies, i.e. not allowing children back into school with nits even though treated, are no longer practiced in most schools.

- “Epidemics” of head lice may generally be attributed to incorrect identification and misdiagnosis. Much “information” about head lice is based on old, unproven information generated more than 80 years ago. Some is propagated by the companies who profit from the sale of lice shampoos and sprays.
- It is probably impossible to totally prevent head lice infestation. Young children at times do come into close head to head contact with each other. Children need to be taught not to share personal items such as combs, brushes and hats and to avoid head to head contact.
- School staff shall report suspected cases of head lice to the school nurse.
- The school nurse shall examine the student.
- The Rocky Hill Public Schools Administrative Regulation for managing presumed head louse infestation in schools is as follows:
 - Responses:
 - If live (crawling) lice are found on the students hair:
 - Notify the parent/guardian of suspected infestation and exclude from school. Advise parent to consult pediatrician for type of product to use.
 - Provide information on the biology of head lice and the methods to eliminate infestation
 - School nurse will re inspect for live lice for re-entry into school.
 - Re inspect hair for live lice in 10-14 days.
 - Students with live lice may not ride the bus.
 - If only nits are discovered on the hair.
 - School Nurse will notify the parent/guardian and provide information about lice and nit removal.
 - Re inspect in 7-10 school days.
 - Unjustified Responses:
 - Notification of classmates parents
 - Mass Screenings
 - Insecticide treatments to school environments
 - Reporting case to youth/social services
 - Bagging clothes
 - Restricted use of headphones or athletic gear (helmets)
- Confidentiality is to be maintained to protect the privacy of students identified as having head lice.
- The school nurse is there to provide education and anticipatory guidance to the school community regarding “best practice” for Pediculosis management.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact your school nurse.

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See the research:

American Academy of Pediatrics

<http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;110/3/638>

Centers for Disease Control

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/lice/factsht_head_lice.htm

Harvard School of Public Health

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html>

National Association of School Nurses

<http://www.nasn.org/Default.aspx?tabid=237>