

Hitting the nits

With school now back in full swing, children will be meeting old friends and making some new friends too. Probably “sleep-overs” will again become part of the school-year landscape. But beware, you could be entertaining some uninvited guests as well. Statistics indicate that more than 20% of primary school students are likely to have head lice; state to state. However, the fact is anyone with a head can catch head lice – regardless of age, sex, background or how clean your hair is. Head lice spread anywhere that people work, play and live together. Most often children get them at school – often at the start of school. Indeed, it takes only one infested head to infest a whole classroom full of heads; then our children so unselfishly pass the infestation on to the rest of the family.

The medical term for head lice is *pediculus humanus capitis*. But whichever way you describe them, these tiny wingless insects are extremely common. Head lice are endemic in Australia. They cannot jump or fly but they certainly get around; and they live their entire life (about a month or so) on the head of their host. Their favourite hiding places are behind the ears and at the back of the neck. Female lice lay their eggs (known as nits) close to the scalp, where they remain firmly stuck to the base of the hair shaft until they hatch in about a week's time.

Head lice feed exclusively on human blood; but unlike mosquitoes, another group of little blood suckers, it appears that head lice do not carry disease. They can, however, cause severe itching and this can lead to scratching and skin infections. Of course an itchy scalp may be due to many other causes – among them dandruff, psoriasis and so-called seborrhoeic dermatitis. So, before you start shampooing with insecticide, it's best to get an accurate diagnosis. The recently revised Pharmacy Self Care fact card titled *Head Lice* will help confirm the problem and find the solution as well.

The good news is that if you or your children have head lice, there are simple, safe and effective strategies to send them on their way. Various shampoos, lotions, cream rinses and conditioners are available. Many chemical treatments are based on the chrysanthemum-type pyrethrin insecticides; some contain malathion; and there are several remedies available based on essential oils such as anise, lavender, rosemary and the Australian favourite melaleuca (tea tree) oil. When used as indicated in some studies these natural treatments have been shown to be more effective even than the chemical treatments. If live lice are found in the combings after treatment, it's possible that the head lice are resistant to the particular product, and the person should be retreated as soon as possible using a product from a different group. Nevertheless, most treatment failures are due to inadequate time in contact with hair and scalp, inappropriate application methods, or the use of ineffective products. Ask your pharmacist to recommend an evidence-based product, that is, one that is proven to be effective.

Remember whatever head lice treatment you choose, a fine toothcomb is essential to get the nits out and a good hair conditioner will get rid of the knots.

If you find dead lice, the product has worked; but you will need to retreat in 7-10 days to catch the lice that have since emerged from newly hatched eggs. For persistent cases, discuss with your pharmacist whether you need to change the treatment to another with a different active ingredient; and consider a “hitting the nits” program at your school.

In any event call into a Self Care Pharmacy and pick up the *Head Lice* fact card. Call 1300 369 772 for the nearest location.