

THE HEADLOUSE — the *Pediculus humanus capitis* to give it its grand name — is, I am afraid, still with us and thriving.

The louse is a very small insect, the size of a pinhead. It needs to feed five times a day and has a definite preference for children's blood. It has to live on, or very close to, the scalp, and has a strong preference for short, fine, clean hair — so please do not rush out and cut your child's hair!

Having said all this, headlice are actually carried within the population all the time, and mostly by adult women. They are passed on by head-to-head contact. They do not jump, nor do they have wings and fly. It is erroneous to believe that only school-children get headlice, for the truth is that an adult has passed lice on to a child, and many carriers are totally unaware that they have them.

Angry

It is easily understood why parents get so angry and agitated, because once the louse gets on to a child's head schools become an ideal breeding-ground. There are a number of reasons why this is so.

Firstly, many small children are hotbeds of infection, sore throats, ear-aches and all manner of infectious diseases doing the rounds. This results in raised temperatures, and a higher amount of heat radiating from the head will attract the headlice. These children become like little homing beacons. Add to this a child's fine, clean hair and tasty blood, and paradise has been attained as far as the beastly creature is concerned — the whole breeding cycle speeds up as well.

Problems

The problems only then begin to start, because a child can be carrying lice for up to 4-6 weeks before they are detected. The louse can disguise itself very effectively against the colour of the child's hair and scalp.

The female louse has a life-cycle of roughly 42 days, and, once she is es-

MARION THORNE

The headlouse is with us and thriving!

Established on a head and finds a male companion, she will lay 5-10 eggs a day for the rest of her life. In ideal conditions they will hatch after three days and then get cracking themselves, and there are three females to every male on a head. A healthy head can sustain about 200 lice, each feeding five times a day from the child's blood.



Lousy

This, of course, is the extreme case, and lice are usually discovered long before this situation develops. However, if it should become severe it can make a child feel quite unwell — scratching the head can lead to impetigo, eczema, and swollen infected glands in the neck, which leads to a feeling of lethargy. In other words, the child feels quite lousy — an intentional pun!

The most important aspect in the fight to get rid of headlice is a heightened public awareness and health education. School nurses aim to show a film to the oldest children in nearly all primary schools every term: all parents receive a cordial invitation to attend and discuss any problems. It is unfortunate that only the most motivated of parents do attend. My own feeling is that until this little menace affects your own family one feels safe and secure in the hope that it never will.

When it does occur, how do we treat it? There are two effective lotions which are used — Prioderm and Carylderm, both of which are also pesticides used in crop spraying. Prioderm contains Malathion and Carylderm contains Carbyryl.

Resistance

These lotions are used alternately to try to prevent the louse becoming resistant to them. At the moment, Prioderm is the lotion of choice. Lice are, however, beginning to acquire resistance to the lotion and we wish to have Carylderm in reserve for use next year.

The lotions should be used strictly according to the instructions on the bottle, and the whole family must be treated, including granny.

I wish to emphasise that both of these preparations have been thoroughly tested and are totally safe.

However, if your child should have eczema or any other allergy and you have doubts about using them, your doctor may be able to recommend some other preparation.

On the continent, several other preparations can be bought, but they have not been tested and proven safe in this country. Although they may prove more effective, please bear in mind that there may be side-effects as they are all made from pesticides.

Both Prioderm and Carylderm claim to give the hair a protective coating against further infection. However, my experience in North Devon has been that this does not last long, for two reasons.

First, our water has a relatively high amount of naturally-occurring chlorine in it, and this weakens the protection of the lotion remaining on the hair. Second, nearly every child in the area now attends the Leisure Centre for swimming lessons, and here chlorine has definitely been added to the pool water, stripping all remaining protection from the hair. Swimming hats give some protection, but unless a cap is skull-tight water will seep in under it.

Grooming

We therefore come back to wondering what mechanical means we have to help us fight the headlouse. The first and most important is good grooming. It sounds too easy, but combing the hair night and morning with an ordinary comb, scraping it right down to the scalp and all over the head, works wonders. If there are lice they will move, and the chances are that you will damage them. Break even one of the six legs on an insect and it cannot survive and breed.

The Victorians were great ones for brushing and combing their hair — one hundred strokes every night. I am sure that headlice were about at that time, but pesticides were not! Instil this practice in your children and your problems are half-solved. Another tip is to comb vinegar

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through the hair after rinsing it following shampooing. Many parents have done this for years with effect: it gives hair a beautiful shine and will also help loosen the nits — dead lice eggs which look like dandruff but are stuck on to the hair with the special brand of glue the louse makes.

One lady to whom I talked spoke highly of lavender oil as a treatment recommended to her by a herbalist as a method of getting rid of headlice, but I have not heard of anyone else who has used this method.

We do, however, recommend combing a small amount of baby oil, Vitapointe, hair gel or Brylcreem through the hair following treatment, and also at other times when washing the hair. This is helpful as the louse finds it impossible to get a grip on the hair to lay its eggs.

Enthusiasm

Do not be worried by one or two lice. Comb them out vigorously and keep the lotion for emergencies only. Weekly use of lotions is not wise, as it only weakens their efficiency when they are needed in a real outbreak of these pestilential creatures.

As I mentioned before, school nurses go into most primary schools

every term to show films and talk about infestation and its prevention. The children themselves respond with great enthusiasm, and I have recently had a great response from them in the form of posters, pictures, poems, and even lice mobiles! I end with a poem from among those submitted from Newport Primary School for a competition.

*Headlice, headlice, creeping, crawling everywhere — on your head,
Headlice, headlice, hiding in your hair, laying eggs — everywhere,
Headlice, headlice, comb them, wash them OUT,
No-one likes them — headlice.*

Contact Mrs Marion J. Thorne SRN, School Nursing Sister, The Hollies, Newton Tracey, Barnstaple, North Devon EX31 3PN.

JUST A TICK is just the thing for planning a health education curriculum in primary or secondary schools. Standard topics checklists are designed for completion by pupils, parents, staff, governors, and health-care personnel. Once you discover the 'priority' topics for each group you can start to make realistic decisions. Contact the Unit for more details.