

Lice Information

It's a fact of life. If your children go to school or camp, they will each almost certainly end up with at least one case of head lice over the years.

Between six million and 12 million children a year become infected with lice, according to the Centers for Disease Control. The tiny bugs, no bigger than a sesame seed, spread easily among children ages 3 to 11, who are likely to come into close head-to-head contact with one another or share hats, headbands and the like.

Although head lice pose no health threat, they can be an expensive, creepy nuisance. Some estimates put the cost of treating lice at \$1 billion a year.

Investing a few dollars in a handful of drugstore products and a willingness to become your own household nitpicker will work well.

Here are some low-cost steps to take if lice have invaded the heads in your household.

REALITY CHECK

The note comes home from school or camp saying lice have been spotted. Don't jump to the conclusion that your child is among the infested. Instead, comb or finger through your child's hair thoroughly to look for evidence, parting the hair all the way to the scalp. What you think may be lice or nits could be specks of dirt or dandruff. Live lice, which can be tan or grayish white, move quickly and can be hard to capture or even see. A magnifying glass can help. Look also for nits, tiny white or yellow eggs that stick like superglue to the hair shaft. If you have trouble removing the suspicious speck, it's probably a nit. If it brushes right off, it's far more likely to be dandruff or something else.

If your child does have the real thing, it is tempting to run to the drugstore, buy the first lice-killing shampoo you can find (for \$12 to \$20), use it and forget all about lice.

Unfortunately, it's not that easy. No pesticide gets rid of the nits. If you do use one of these products you need to reapply about 10 days later in case any eggs have hatched. You may even find you need a third application after another 10 days, because some nits survived the second application. Even if you use the pesticide, it is still a good idea to follow with diligent combing and nitpicking each day until you are fairly sure the lice and eggs are gone. Due to over reporting, over use of lice products and fear of lice, many cases have grown resistant to the active ingredients in over-the-counter products. You may treat and see no results at all. When that happens, pediatricians may provide a prescription for heavy-duty pesticides. She, for one, advocates nonchemical alternatives.

NATURAL ALTERNATIVES

If you're uncomfortable using pesticides or if resistance is a problem, there is an abundance of natural remedies to choose from. Parents, professional nitpickers, some pediatricians and other experts have sworn by home remedies like applying mayonnaise, olive oil or conditioners to the hair overnight. The idea is to suffocate the live lice. You can ask your pediatrician for advice.

CALM DOWN

Sure, it is creepy to see the insects crawling around in your family's hair. But when you consider that just about everyone goes through this, no matter how clean their houses or fancy their neighborhoods, you can focus your psychic energy on pest control. There is no need to pay for exterminators to kill lice in your house. These aren't bed bugs. A louse can live no longer than 24 hours without a host. So if it does migrate to bed or carpet, and doesn't find another head to crawl onto, it will die soon. Note: We're talking about human heads. The lice that gorge on people's blood cannot survive on dogs or cats, so there is no need to worry about your pets serving as hosts. In the meantime, wash bed linens in hot water and dry at high heat for 20 minutes to kill any runaway lice. Throw stuffed animals, pillows and other textiles that have come in contact with the infected person's head in the drier. Thoroughly vacuum around the bed, but you don't have to go crazy. Lice that have strayed that far from a host aren't long for this world.