

PEDICULOSIS (HEAD LICE) – PEDICULOSI

Pediculosis is caused by very small parasites (2-3 millimeters), also known as head lice, which live exclusively on human scalps feeding on their blood.

The color of the lice, off-white or gray, can become lighter or darker, in relation to the color of hair that “hosts” them, becoming camouflaged.

The female deposits from 100 to 300 eggs (also known as nits), 8-10 per day, which stick to the hair with a gluey substance. After 6-10 days, larvae grow from these nits, which will then become adult parasites within approximately 10 days.

The lice only survive for 1 or 2 days if not on a human scalp, since they require heat and food to live.

Pediculosis is diffuse throughout the world. It is not a sign of poor hygiene, and it affects individuals in any social status. Pediculosis is particularly common in children and adolescents, yet, can also affect adults.

HOW DOES PEDICULOSIS MANIFEST ITSELF?

Usually one becomes aware of head lice from itching of the scalp, often persistent itching, until scratches and scabs appear. Oftentimes, there is no itching, and these tiny parasite are discovered by chance, usually when hair is combed or washed. It can occur that only the eggs are present, which appear as miniscule (approximately 1 millimeter) white or gray “shells” firmly attached to the hair. These are difficult to remove, unlike dandruff that can easily be removed.

In this case, as well, an infested person might not have itching of the scalp.

The areas on the scalp on which the lice and nits nest are the nape of the neck, the temples, and behind the ears. To see them, the hair must be lifted very slowly, letting it fall “against the nap” (*n.b.* in the opposite direction of growth), and observing it very carefully.

HOW ARE LICE TRANSMITTED?

Infestation is extremely easy and mostly occurs through normal contact of the head with hair that has been infested with these parasites. Rarely does infestation occur through combs, brushes, hats, bed linens, etc.

Due to this, diffusion within a family or in schools is very frequent.

HOW TO PREVENT PEDICULOSIS

No particular precautions exist in preventing pediculosis.

However, it is best if the presence of head lice is detected early, in order to quickly eliminate these parasites. Therefore, parents should often check their children for head lice.

Frequently washing and checking your child’s hair (twice a week), in addition to correct personal hygiene, helps in quickly detecting an infestation. Cutting your child’s hair short, is not necessary.

Head lice shampoos or other products do not impede pediculosis from occurring, therefore, they should not be used as a preventive measure.

HOW ARE HEAD LICE ELIMINATED?

If you find lice or lice eggs, you must use one of the many products sold in pharmacies used to eliminate lice (powder, gel, shampoos). These products kill the parasites, yet, they often are not as effective on the lice eggs.

As also indicated on the instructions given with these head lice products (the instructions must be followed very carefully), it is recommended that the treatment be repeated after several days (7-10 days), in order to kill the larvae, which may still be alive inside the eggs.

After treatment, a very narrow-tooth comb (often contained in the box of the head-lice product) should be used to facilitate removing the eggs.

The eggs should be eliminated by pulling them off or cutting the hair on which they are attached.

If a case of pediculosis is verified in the family, all family members must be checked.

All combs and brushes should be washed with hot water, using a head lice shampoo for greater precaution, and soaking them for at least an hour in a bucket.

Even if lice are usually not transmitted through objects, it is recommended that bed sheets, pillow cases, towels, or other objects, which might have come into contact with the parasites or their larvae, be washed at a temperature of 60°C in a washing machine (temperatures above 53.5°C kill both lice and their eggs).

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