

GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS TO CONTROL HEAD LICE

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Disease Investigations and Surveillance Branch California Department of Health Services

Head lice infestation continues to be a problem in homes, day care centers, elementary and preschools in California and elsewhere mostly due to head-to-head contact or sharing of combs and brushes. Transmission from child to child can occur from exchange of hats, clothing, barrettes, helmets, scarves, headphones, and other personal items. Most schools have a no nit policy and require treatment and the use of a nit comb to remove all eggs (nits) before a child can return to school.

INSPECTING A CHILD'S HEAD AND NIT COMBING. Daily removal of lice and their nits from a child's hair with a metal nit or flea comb is the most effective lice control measure. Head lice are much more likely to be transmitted from family members and playmates than in the school setting. Inspect all family members' hair thoroughly, especially in areas close to the scalp at the neckline and behind the ears. Complete nit combing of the entire head has to be performed every day (dampen hair for easier combing) until no more lice or nits are found. Several brands of metal (not plastic) nit combs with long teeth are available at your local pharmacy. A good example is the LiceMeister®* metal comb for about 10 dollars. Metal flea combs, bought at pet stores, can be used as well.

Correct identification of actual nits is critical. Anything that slides along the hair shaft is not a nit. Any nits that cannot be combed out must be removed either by picking them out with the fingernails or snipping the hair between the scalp and where the eggs are attached. A useful method for nit combing is to part the hair into small sections. As each section is combed, pin the hair to the scalp as a beautician would do. This keeps track of what has been combed.

TREATMENT FOR HEAD LICE. Permethrin or pyrethrins is the active ingredient in most over-the-counter control products. The active ingredient of choice is **permethrin**, which is currently in Nix®* cream rinse formulation. Follow the label directions carefully, but do not go beyond the recommended duration of application. Research has shown that extending the application duration does not increase effectiveness. Only treat individuals with lice. It is important to apply one treatment per infested person. Do not divide treatments among infested people. Do not treat a second time until at least 7-10 days have followed the first treatment. Treatment "failures" usually result from the following:

- 1) lice re-infestation from a sibling or playmate
- 2) incomplete combing out or removal of the nits
- 3) not strictly following labeled directions
- 4) not realizing it may take 8-12 hours for the lice to die
- 5) incorrect identification (i.e., the problem was not lice).

Permethrin resistance may be the reason for failure only if none of the above situations apply. If permethrin or pyrethrin products are not effective, consider contacting your physician about the prescription, Ovide®*, which research has shown to be very effective. The label of this alcohol-based product states that 8-12 hours contact time is needed, then remove nits with a fine-toothed metal comb. Prescription products containing lindane, are not recommended, and will be prohibited from sale after January 2002 due to legislation passed in California in 2000.

CONTROL MEASURES THAT ARE NOT RECOMMENDED. There is no scientific evidence to support use of products such as vinegar or compounds advertised to dissolve the glue on the nits (to ease their removal) or to kill the nits. Also, there is no scientific data to support claims that mayonnaise, olive oil, or tea tree oil on the hair can “suffocate” the nits and lice.

LICE BIOLOGY AND WASHING RECOMMENDATIONS. Do not substitute these steps for a treatment of permethrin followed by daily removal of nits with a metal nit or flea comb. There is no need to apply pesticides in the home. Lice die quickly (within 2 days) without a blood meal. Nits take 8-10 days to hatch, and then it takes about nine or more days for the lice to become adults and lay eggs. The following may be done to decrease the chance of re-infestation from lice or nits attached to clothing and hair:

- 1) Clothing and bedding may be washed in hot water (130°C) then dried on a hot cycle for at least 20 minutes
- 2) Items that are not washable may be dry cleaned or put in a sealed plastic bag for two weeks to prevent lice hatched from nits from getting a blood meal
- 3) ~~Socks~~ combs, brushes, hair bands, and barrettes in rubbing alcohol or Lysol®* for 1 hour, or boil for five minutes.
- 4) Carpets and furniture can be vacuumed.

Please contact your local health department if there are additional questions. For head lice treatment information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov/dpd/parasites/headlice/factsheet_head_lice_treating.htm.

These head lice guidelines will be at www.dhs.ca.gov/ps/dcdc/pdf/HeadLiceGuidelinesParents.pdf.

*Use of a product name is for identification purposes only and does not constitute endorsement.