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Head lice an unpleasant fact of life among school-aged children, families

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Jeannine Jennings of The Lice Squad poses with the image of electron microscope view of a head louse reflected in her magnifying glasses in Milton, Ont. on Nov. 2, 2006. (CP/Frank Gunn)

TORONTO (CP) - There's absolutely nothing nice about lice. Take Alexander Stewart's word for it.

The creepy critters took up residence on Stewart's scalp for about a month a couple of years back, when his east-end Toronto school struggled with an infestation of *Pediculus humanus capitis* - the fancy Latin name for the lowly human head louse.

As often happens, the lice "ping-ponged" among the students, with children who had been treated getting reinfested by friends still grappling with the problem.

"Everyone in our class kept getting it and then we were giving it back and forth to each other, and that shampoo stuff didn't work at all," says Stewart, now 12.

"One of my friends had really long hair and had to cut it really short because of the lice."

Eventually Stewart's mother managed to get rid of the pesky bugs by conducting a virtual search and destroy campaign on the nits (eggs), nymphs (immature lice) and adult lice that were infesting his scalp.

"When she was picking the lice out of my hair, I felt like a monkey getting groomed by a mother monkey," he recalls of that experience.

We may like to think of lice as a problem of yesteryear, of the days before hot running water, daily bathing and the horseless carriage. But it's no secret to parents of young children, elementary school teachers, principals and public health nurses that infestations of lice are as predictable as the turn of the seasons.

With the start of school in the fall, numbers of cases of lice begin to rise, particularly in day-care centres, kindergartens and elementary schools. The behaviour of little kids is perfect for moving lice from one head to the next.

Imagine story time. Heads touching, Alicia and Sarah share the wonders of a picture book. If one has head lice, that's not all they're sharing.

As an infestation comes to light, their parents will be sharing something else. Big headaches and anxiety.

In Jeannine Jennings' experience, parents - and particularly mothers - can have a very hard time dealing with the fact that little Max came home with head lice.

"A lot of women take it very personally," says Jennings, who owns west-end Toronto franchises of a lice-removal business called The Lice Squad.

"(They think) their house is unkempt, they don't take care of their children. It's like a shame thing to them. A lot of women have like total nervous breakdowns."

They shouldn't, says Dr. Richard Mathias, a doctor and professor of medicine at the University of British Columbia who has made a specialty out of finding the best way to

eradicate head lice.

Mathias and others debunk the supposed link between head lice and poor hygiene, suggesting lice actually prefer clean hair.

"It's not a sign of not looking after yourself or your kids or being negligent or any of those kinds of things. It's just not," Mathias says.

"What we generally find is that the happiest and healthiest head lice are found on clean heads. They like it. It's easy for them to get around. . . . And they do get around."

Older children and adults are by no means immune. But as we get older, we're less likely to touch heads with one other, giving us a sort of behavioural protection against louse invasion. Still, it's not uncommon for parents to pick up lice if their children bring them home.

Jennings even admits she's "taken work home" on occasion.

So what should parents do when they get the dreaded phone call or the letter from their child's school?

A trip to the drug store is likely the first step, though there are services like Jennings' which will handle the whole picky process for a price.

And eventually, a new blow dryer-like device called the LouseBuster may be an answer. University of Utah researchers reported this month in the journal *Pediatrics* on a device that kills lice and dries out their eggs during a half-hour treatment they suggest could be done in schools. But it's not yet on the market.

For those going the delousing shampoo route, the treatments are generally made with pyrethrins - a natural extract of chrysanthemums - or permethrin, a synthetic equivalent.

There's a common perception these shampoos don't work very well, or that the lice have become resistant to the chemicals in them. And it is true that some lice are resistant to the commercial shampoos, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

But a treatment failure can as often be the result of improper application, ping-ponging in schools, or the fact that unhatched nits can come through the shampooing totally unscathed and will therefore go on to hatch and start a new cycle of infestation.

"The cement that's used (by the female louse) to cement the egg onto the hair is insoluble," Mathias says. "There's nothing you could use (to dissolve it) that wouldn't destroy the hair."

People using the shampoos should follow the instructions carefully. Don't rewash the hair afterwards with regular shampoo and don't use cream rinse.

Based on studies he has conducted, Mathias recommends following up the first treatment with a second round about a week later. That will kill the new lice in the nymph stage - after they've hatched, but before they've laid new eggs. The CDC also suggests a second treatment may be needed.

Their advice differs slightly on how much effort needs to go into environmental cleaning - washing sheets, clothes, caps and coats.

"Head lice live only on the body. Treat the head. That's it. You don't have to do the rest of it," Mathias says.

The CDC says people don't need to blitz their homes, but it recommends washing sheets and washable clothing that an infested person used within two days prior to treatment and drycleaning others. Items that can't be washed or drycleaned should be stored in a sealed plastic bag for two weeks to ensure all lice are dead, the agency's website says.

It also recommends thorough cleaning of brushes and combs, and suggests vacuuming floors and furniture - though it notes the risk of becoming infested by a louse that has fallen on a carpet is "very small."

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On the Net:

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control has a lot of information about head lice and treatment, at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/lice/default.htm>

The University of British Columbia also has a site devoted to the detection and treatment of lice, at <http://www.healthcare.ubc.ca/lice/>

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Some common misconceptions about head lice:

Only people with poor hygiene get head lice: Not true. In fact, lice apparently prefer clean hair. Regular shampoos don't dislodge the eggs, called nits, that lice lay, so you could wash your hair daily and still have lice.

Lice jump from one head to the next: Lice are pesky and persistent, but they aren't jumpers, says UBC's Dr. Richard Mathias. They are transmitted when an infested head makes contact with another head. "They feel the pressure and they'll reach out and grab a hair."

Commercial treatments are useless: It is true some lice are resistant to the chemicals in delousing shampoos. But often what looks like treatment failure is actually reinfestation - a treated child getting infested anew by an untreated friend - or treatment that wasn't done properly.

Lice in a house means everyone needs to be treated: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control suggests checking everyone in the household but only treating the family member or members with lice.

Load up the washing machine: Head lice live on heads and they don't survive off heads for very long. So it's not necessary to throw everything in a home in the washing machine. CDC suggests some washing of items worn or touched by the infested head in the 48 hours before treatment started.

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