

TO: All Hawthorne Families

FROM: Parent Council

DATE: Sept/06

## **HEAD LICE: TIPS AND STRATEGIES**

Many of us have experienced the frustration, disruption and general upset of head lice. We have taken time away from jobs and other activities to deal with the problem. We have wasted money on pesticide shampoos and plastic combs that are ineffective and may be harmful to health. Some of us have been fortunate to get helpful tips and support from other parents, while others have struggled along on their own.

The purpose of this lice fact sheet is to ensure all parents have access to knowledge gained through hard experience by families who have dealt with repeated outbreaks of lice. By sharing information and encouraging discussion, we may be able to save each other some distress and reduce the number of recurring episodes at our school.

**TIP #1:** Head lice are not caused by being dirty, and you cannot prevent or get rid of head lice by frequent shampooing or bathing. In fact, there is some evidence that natural oils and dirt repel lice, and that those with the cleanest hair are most likely to get them. Children with longer hair may experience more frequent bouts of head lice: short hair or hair tied up in a ponytail can reduce exposure.

**TIP #2:** Using the pesticide shampoos on sale at many drugstores will not by itself get rid of lice. Many people have concerns about both the toxicity and the effectiveness of these products. For alternative home remedies that many have found helpful, see below.

**TIP #3:** Repeated combing and nit-picking (checking the head for lice eggs, also called "nits", under a bright light) are the two most important aspects to successful treatment. At best, a pesticide shampoo or other home treatment can reduce the number of live lice, but will not remove all the lice eggs. Unless the hair is also combed thoroughly at regular intervals (preferably daily) to remove eggs as well as surviving lice, a new generation will hatch within 7-10 days. The life-cycle of lice is 30 days, therefore it is important that regular lice/nit checks are done repeatedly for this time period to ensure complete eradication.

**TIP #4:** Unfortunately, the plastic combs that are often sold along with the pesticide shampoos are generally useless, because the teeth are too far apart to catch the offending creatures. Only the higher quality metal combs are effective. These can sometimes be hard to find, and they cost \$25-35. If you are having trouble getting one ask other parents who may be happy to lend theirs. We all have an interest in helping each other solve this problem!

**TIP #5:** Some families have found professional lice-removal services to be extremely helpful both in addressing the immediate problem and educating us about how to deal with it more efficiently in future. These services do cost money; however many have found it worth the expense to get their children back to school and themselves back to work. We do not provide official endorsements to any private enterprise. However in the spirit of information sharing, here is a service that some families have found helpful:

The Lice Squad     416-466-0261

## Home Remedies

There are plenty of head lice sites on the internet, where you may find useful information to help you. Here are some successful, safe, tried-and-true methods used by Hawthorne parents for treating head lice (remembering that daily nit-picking, combing and perseverance must be part of the treatment):

1. Olive oil treatment. Lice breathe through their sides, therefore if they are encased in a thick substance like olive oil for several hours, they will suffocate. (This is the thinking behind old remedies such as dousing the head with coal dust oil or kerosene)!

Procedure: work @ 1 cup of olive oil, or enough to thoroughly saturate your child's head, from scalp to hair tip. Tie a plastic bag tightly around the scalp, and cover with a shower cap. You may want to drape a towel around your child's shoulders to catch any drips. Leave the olive oil on for a minimum of 2 hours (just enough time to watch a favourite video or enjoy a great book), then comb out the oil along with lice and nits, and wash the remaining oil out in the shower. To be most effective, it is recommended you follow this procedure once a day for three consecutive days.

TIP: you may want to use several drops of TEA TREE OIL mixed in with the olive oil. This essential oil is believed to be non-toxic to humans but effective as a lice deterrent, although it does not kill them directly.

2. Tea Tree Oil shampoo: there are several Tea Tree Oil shampoos which you may wish to try. Ask your pharmacist or check the alternative health stores. Several drops of Tea Tree Oil mixed with your regular shampoo is also considered effective.
3. Vinegar solution: when you are nit-picking, a solution of ½ vinegar and ½ water helps to loosen and dissolve the nit casings. It is much easier to remove nits by hand when this solution is first combed through the hair.
4. Hair dryer treatment: along with the olive oil and tea tree oil shampoo, there is some evidence that supports the use of a hair dryer. The heat helps to melt the nit casings.

Procedure: low setting, for 20-30 minutes (or as long as your child will stand without feeling uncomfortable), pay particular attention to the back of the neck and behind the ears – this is where lice tend to lay most eggs. Then comb out with a good quality comb. CAUTION: you need to be careful with this treatment to avoid overheating/burning your child's head, but we have found it is effective if done with care.

5. Dippity do/cream rinse comb-through: similar to an olive oil treatment, but faster. Recommended after the 3-day olive oil treatment has been completed and you are fairly sure there are no nits/lice left, you may want to do this treatment each night (or every other night) before a bath for several weeks (up to a month, and even weekly after that). This does not replace the olive oil treatment since it does not kill the lice/eggs, just makes it easier to remove them if there are any left on your child's head.

Procedure: saturate your child's head with a thick, cheap hair product, then comb out with nit comb. Any nits or emerging lice will comb right out.

TIP: Dippity-do is harder to comb out than cream rinse.

6. Hair spray/gel: when sending your lice-free child back to school, consider coating the hair with spray or gel until you are sure the classroom is entirely lice-free. The spray/gel makes it much harder for lice to attach to hair, reducing the chance of re-infestation.
7. Shaving the back of the hair: since the back of the head is the favoured spot for laying eggs, this can be quite effective. For children with longer hair (and for those who are loath to cut their hair), consider shaving the nape to the crown under the longer top hairs, leaving the hair long enough to hide the shaved parts. With the hair down, it is impossible to tell the hair underneath has been cut.
8. **IMPORTANT NOTE WHEN YOUR CHILD HAS LICE**: please be considerate of other families, and tell your teacher, daycare worker and

Joan in the office that your child has head lice. That way the other families can receive the pediculosis (head lice) letter home, and check their children. This is the only way we can rid the school of head lice once and for all.

9. **IMPORTANT NOTE WHEN YOUR CHILD IS LICE-FREE:** when returning your child to school, please check in with Dudley Paul or Janice Kent (and daycare if your child attends). They need to check your child's head before allowing him or her to return to class/daycare. Again, this is an important consideration for other families, even if it is an inconvenience to you.

### **A few little-known facts we've learned:**

1. It is not necessary to go crazy cleaning your house every day. Live lice do not cling very well to anything but hair (nits cling better, but only survive 2-3 days off the host). Do clean well with a vacuum cleaner and damp mop initially (when lice are first detected), but after treatment starts it is more important to spend time checking heads than anything else. You do need to do a lot of laundry for a while, however. Wash your child's sheets, pillowcases and towels daily in hot water until you are certain there are no nits left. For larger items like comforters and pillows, 20-30 minutes in the dryer should be fine to kill lice and nits.
2. Just because you don't see lice, doesn't mean your child doesn't have lice. If your child's head is itchy, and you suspect that he/she has come in contact with a child with lice, assume the worst and check carefully. Adult lice move really quickly through the hair, therefore in many cases you won't see a louse no matter how hard you look. Instead, look for bites (red, itchy spots on the scalp, usually at the back or top of the head) and especially look for nits.

NOTE: some children may not feel itchy, but they may feel unwell and complain of a headache or sore neck. You may find bumps on the head which are not itchy or sore – these may indicate an allergic response to lice bites.

3. Nits can be very hard to see, and until you know what you are looking for you may miss them, so here is what you need to know about nits:
  - they can be found within ½ -1 inch of the base of the hair shaft. If they are further away from the scalp than that, they may be dead or not viable.
  - they are hard to remove. Dandruff and dirt will fall easily off the hair shaft when touched. Nits are encased in a gluey substance and will not budge unless you grasp them between your fingernails and pull.
  - unlike dandruff and dirt, nits are symmetrical. They are oblong and

smooth, about the size of a very small sesame seed, and they are usually grey or white.

- there is only one nit per hair.

- the two best places to search for nits are behind the ears and the back of the head.

4. Nits are light coloured, and are therefore easier to see on children with darker hair. Adult lice are usually (but not always) dark, and are therefore easier to spot on children with lighter hair.
5. Some eyes might need a little help! You are going to be spending hours nit-picking your child's head. Consider purchasing a good pair of magnifying eyeglasses (not a magnifying glass, since you need both hands to nit-pick). One parent we know used a jeweller's loupe, another had their reading glasses upgraded with magnification. Seeing the nits is half the battle!
6. Head lice can be eradicated! Yes, it may seem impossible at first, but it isn't. Have hope! We have been there, too, and we have successfully rid our homes of lice. Our number one piece of advice: be persistent and nit-pick daily. Check heads regularly for 30 days, then weekly throughout the school year.

Please let us know if you have any further great advice and tips.

Lisa Philipps and Philippa Dowding  
Hawthorne Parent Volunteers