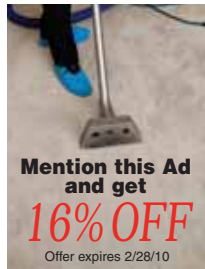


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# The DREADED Four Letter Word -

By Jan Gadbois

My husband was traveling and I was busy showering my 4 young children for soccer pictures in the morning. I was blow drying each head to avoid the dreaded “bed head” for pictures. That’s when my daughter said to go easy, she had a mosquito bite on her head. Upon closer inspection, I saw what she was referring to. I also saw a bug on her head. My first thought was a flea. However, we were pet free at the time, so it seemed unlikely. It’s Friday night at 8 p.m. What do I do? I call the doctor’s office for advice and wait impatiently for the call back. I’m told to look for nits. What is a nit and what does it look like? The on-call doctor patiently explains that nits are tiny white or yellowish eggs at the base of the hair. He also admits that if I have seen a bug (louse), my child has likely been infested for some time. Great! Just what I wanted to hear. I continue to search for nits, but I’m coming up empty. My doctor sends me to the pharmacy for a product called Nix and tells me to get to work. I am near tears by now. I call my neighbor and ask, “What do you know about head lice?” Her nervous response is, “Why do you ask?” To this day, I am wondering how to repay her for spending a long 6 hours treating, combing and checking my children with me. We discovered that 3 of my children were infested. Rest assured, I found plenty of nits!

Our lice infestation happened 4-1/2 years ago. My family was very open about our lice problem. My children were young and had no fear of sharing their experience with their friends. I wish that everyone understood that lice prefer healthy people and clean heads and that it has no social or economic boundary. You must catch it from someone else, just like you catch a cold. It is when people are afraid to talk about it that the spread continues. They inadvertently infest a friend or teammate and if not told, that person continues the cycle. Here is some basic information and a few tips that I picked up on our way through lice treatment.

The good news is that lice cannot fly or jump. They are spread from one person to another by head to head contact. This happens when children sleep over, wrestle, hug, carpool or play with each others hair. Although less common, you can get head lice from shared hats, coats, combs, brushes, pillows, sports gear, dress up clothes, etc.

Adult lice can live up to 30 days on your head. While making a home on your head, each louse can lay up to 8 eggs per day. Each of those eggs (nits) hatch within a week and mature a week after hatching. If you’ve done the math, you can see how rapidly the population grows. I recall hearing that you will not notice symptoms for up to 4 weeks after infestation. I can’t support that claim, but if it’s true, you have been exposing family, friends, classmates and teammates for weeks before you find the first nit. Needless to say, I had quite a few phone calls to make once we confirmed our lice infestation.

A louse lives only a day or two without a host head. Nits cannot live beyond a week on a hair that falls from your head. They need your body’s heat to grow and hatch. This information is helpful when making your home environment safe again.

I will admit that dealing with a lice infestation was not easy. I spent countless hours combing and checking my children for lice. My daughter was infested twice more before our school nurse and I began what we called “close contact checks” or “the circle of friends”. The nurse checked children that I considered close contacts. Most parents aren’t checking or, like myself, have no idea what they are looking for. This allowed her to find children who were infested and advise other parents on how to treat for lice. Once you know what to look for, you can continue to check your child in the hopes of preventing future spread. There are many helpful websites. Some grade schools also offer links and advice for diagnosis and treatment.

# LICE!



I was overwhelmed removing lice/nits from heads and anything in our home that could be a threat. I had little time to read up on the best way to handle the home. I have picked up a few tips since then and am happy to pass them on.

If you are checking your child for the first time and you do not see any nits, load them up with conditioner and comb thin sections from the scalp. I found it slowed the lice down allowing me to see the actual bug. I used a teasing comb and hair clip to section off hair and keep it out of the way. I needed a bright light (clip lamp worked well) and some readers to get the job done. If you do find a nit or louse, shampoo without any conditioner before treating. Do not shampoo or condition for a day or two after you treat for lice. Be sure to do the follow up treatment as directed. You want to catch any newly hatched lice before they mature and start laying eggs.

If you do not want to use commercial treatments, check with your doctor for natural methods. I used mayonnaise on my daughter for the third re-infestation. I was checking her every 2 days, so I know I caught it right away, but mayonnaise did work when used with thorough nit combing.

I recently learned that there are nit pickers out there! It is a salon setting that requires a combing check of the family and 2 follow-up visits for anyone infested. A friend of mine used the Nitpickers in Northbrook with 100% success.

I do not know of any treatment that kills the nits. Therefore, it is extremely important that you physically remove any nits that haven't hatched.

Buy the best metal nit comb you can find. The plastic ones don't work. Continue checking the head every 2 to 3 days for 2-3 weeks. Depending on the hair, a thorough check will take at least an hour.

While treating heads, it is just as important to remove any nits or lice that may be in your home. I've gotten conflicting advice on this topic. I went with what sounded reasonable to me given what I had learned about the spread of lice. My suggestion is to wash all linens

and towels in hot water and dry on highest setting. Make your life easy and use minimal bedding until the coast is clear. Place what you can't wash in a plastic bag for 2 weeks. Soak combs and brushes for 5 or 10 minutes in very hot water (130 degrees or hotter). I stored mine in ziplocks labeled for each child. Bag extra hair accessories.

Vacuum areas of the house and any furniture that you will be using within a week. Do not spray fumigants on your furniture. They can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin and they don't kill the nits. I put a sheet over our couch each morning and washed it when the kids went to bed. I also reduced our living space so there was less to clean in the event we were re-infested.

Wash clothing in hot water and dry using high heat. Vacuum car seats. Backpacks and helmets can go in the freezer after each use. A hot car works too during the summer months.

Surviving a lice infestation is frustrating and time consuming. I can't go to a movie without wondering if the seat is lice free. I don't let my kids toss their coats in the pile at birthday parties or dances. I avoid shared sports equipment that goes over or on the head. I put a few drops of tea tree oil in every bottle of shampoo (legend has it lice don't like it). My girls often wear braids, pigtails or ponytails in their hair. And I check my kids on a regular basis in the hope that we will not pass lice on to our friends and family in the future.

I have learned so much over the years and I know that if lice should find our family again, we will be able to treat it much more efficiently. Each year I get a few phone calls with questions from an overwhelmed mother that, like me, knew nothing about head lice and has no idea where to begin. Remember, lice prefers healthy people with clean hair. Don't be afraid to share your story with your close contacts. It may prevent you from future infestations. You'd be surprised at how many of your friends have been through it already.

So, are you scratching your head yet? ■

