

Head Lice and Bed Bugs

Parents often request information from our school nurses about a variety of health concerns. Incidences of head lice are an ongoing concern for students, parents, faculty and staff. The recent re-emergence of bed bugs has captured our attention through media presentations. In an effort to help, the health services staff has reviewed the latest research and is providing the following information and web sites as guidelines those concerned about these problems.

Head Lice

Head lice (*pediculus capitis*) are small parasitic insects that live mainly on the scalp and neck hairs of their human hosts. Infestations are far more frequent amongst children than adults. Head lice are equal opportunity parasites; they do not respect socio-economic class distinctions and their presence does not connote a lack of hygiene or sanitation practiced by their host. Head lice are spread by head-to-head contact with an infested person's hair. Lice are not able to fly or jump and are unlikely to wander far from their preferred habitat. Despite commonly held beliefs to the contrary, inanimate objects (such as combs, brushes, hats, helmets, headphones and hair accessories) are insignificant in harboring or transmitting head lice or their eggs. In school, the practice of students placing their hats and gloves in the sleeves of their coats.

Head lice are rarely harmful and they are not known to transmit infectious agents. They are not considered a medical or public health problem. However for the person infested, their movements and bites can cause itching and local reactions which results in scratching and there is a slight risk of a secondary infection. The greatest harm associated with head lice results from the well-intentioned but often misguided use of caustic or toxic substances to eliminate the lice. Because of fear of head lice, some parents have suggested that children refrain from sharing protective batting or biking helmets. The slight risk of acquiring lice from such devices is minor compared to the hazards averted by helmets.

School nurses are asked to examine students if a parent reports that their child has head lice or if a teacher observes a student frequently scratching their head. Although school nurses can identify eggs (nits) and live lice and are happy to assist a parent who is concerned, **the practice of checking entire classes has been demonstrated to be ineffective in identifying students with head lice.** The nurse can check students' heads and depending on the stage of development of the louse, may be too early to find evidence of an infestation. Several days later the student may have evidence of head lice. Consequently **it is imperative that parents take the time to check their children at least every two weeks throughout the year.** Parents can refer to the web site www.identifyus.com for information on identification and treatment of head lice. Another useful site for parents is www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice.

If a student is checked by the nurse and found to have eggs or "nits", the parents are notified and the student is allowed to remain in school. If a student is found to have live lice, the parents are notified to pick and treat the student. It is not our procedure to send letters home as a parent may check their children that night and find them to be "nit" free only to find out several days later that there is an infestation. **Again, due diligence on the part of the parent, checking their children every two weeks, is the most important preventative action they can take.**

Bed Bugs

Bed bugs (*Cimex lectularius*) are small wingless insects that feed solely upon the blood of warm-blooded animals. They are not known to spread disease and do not live on your body as lice do. Hatchling bed bugs are about the size of a poppy seed, and adults are about ¼ inch in length. Their color ranges from nearly white or light tan to a deep brown or burnt orange. You may see a dark red or black mass within the bug's body from the host's blood. Bed bugs can crawl, run and climb. They cannot jump or fly. They seek shelter in dark cracks and crevices. They can cause allergic reactions and secondary infections as well as sleep loss and feeling overwhelmed by the problem.

If you see live, crawling bugs, be certain that they are bed bugs as most small bugs found in the house, even those found on beds are not bed bugs. Other kinds of creatures can bite and feed on blood. The measures needed to remove bed bugs are very costly and require the use of various kinds of pesticides so it is very important to accurately identify any bug you find. If you suspect you have bed bugs and you find an insect, save it for identification. Professional assistance may be necessary to rid your home of bed bugs. See www.identifyus.com or www.mayoclinic.com/health/bedbugs or www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Topics/bedbugs.htm.

As with head lice, bed bugs are found in every community regardless of per capita income or ethnic/racial makeup of the population. Bed bugs infest dwellings and after they have fed, they do not remain on the person. When not feeding, they hide in cracks and crevices where they go unnoticed. Some wander and find their way into clothing pockets and cuffs, book bags, brief cases, purses, luggage and anywhere else that provides shelter. Consequently they may find their way into schools with the belongings of students as well as faculty and staff.

Any member of the school community found to come from a bed bug infested home will not be excluded from school. Every effort will be made to assist families to rid themselves of bed bugs and individuals will be asked to bring only the required items to school each day until the problem has been abated. If bed bugs are suspected in a classroom, the room will be inspected, and rooms will be treated following the Guidelines for Prevention and Management of Bed Bugs published by Cornell University.