Pediculosis Capitus ie. ***HEAD LICE***

Let's face it, nothing much else brings on the "EWW" factor quite like head lice. But the reality is, head lice are not dangerous, just embarrassing and gross. They are not a health hazard nor do head lice transfer disease. They will, however, make your child miss quite a bit of school if nits or lice are found. Most schools have a "no nit" policy, which requires immediate dismissal of children when nits or lice are found.

The adult louse is the size of a sesame seed (I know…what's with the unnecessary food reference Laura?). The female lives 3-4 weeks and attaches eggs or "nits" to the base of the hair shaft near the scalp (its food source, your child!) The eggs hatch in 10-14 days into "nymphs" and feed by injecting their own saliva into the scalp to extract tiny amounts of blood (kinda like mosquitos). Over time, people develop sensitivity to the saliva of the louse (again much like our fun friend the mosquito) and scratch incessantly. What is interesting to remember, however, is a lot of children with the first infestation will not scratch. It may take 4-6 weeks to develop a sensitivity to louse saliva, so if your kid isn't scratching, don't dismiss his "dandruff" too quickly. And conversely, if they are scratching, your child's head lice may have been around longer than you care to think. Eww again, right?

Lice are like little Nascar racers. They don't hop or fly, but man can they crawl fast. They have been clocked at 11 inches per minute, a veritable Jeff Gordon of the insect world. They get from one kid to the next usually by direct contact; I know my kindergartener loves to hug and rub her head on her friends….note to mothers, she is lice free as of the writing!! Otherwise, the obvious sharing of combs, brushes, hats, and hairbands also transmit the little critters. Because they can be so nimble and quick, seeing one can sometimes be a challenge. The best way to discover lice is to see the eggs or "nits" attached to the hair shaft, easiest behind the ears and at the neckline. It can be confusing knowing if eggs are truly eggs, or dandruff, old eggs casings (cast off by nymphs, which is more important after already treating for lice once), or just plain schmutz (medical term) in the hair. If you aren't sure, you can have them analyzed in a lab through your local pediatrician's office. Misdiagnosis (i.e., confusing nits with dandruff, schmutz etc) is also a common problem and has led to over treatment, needless absences from school, and resistance to particular "pediculicides," the products that kill lice. So, once again, if in doubt, have it looked at under a microscope.

In the past, Lindane (formerly marketed as Kwell) was the primary product used to kill lice. However, due to new resistance and more importantly serious safety and toxicity issues in children with Lindane's use, other products are recommended first. Currently, the first choice treatment is Permethrin 1% (marketed as NIX). Permethrin is a synthetic derivative of an extract from the chrysanthemum plant. Hence, it has low toxicity and does not cause allergic reactions due to plant allergies. The product is a cream rinse applied after regular shampooing and left on for 10 minutes. It is then rinsed off. Somehow I always remember having to wear it plastered to my hair for an entire day as a child….(I only had lice once!) but thank goodness for technology. Permethrin leaves a residue on the hair, which is intended to kill any sneaky emerging nymphs smart enough to wait a bit beyond the rinsing. Resistance to this product has recently been reported so it is suggested that the application be repeated in 7-10 days if live lice are seen. Remember don't be fooled by old cast off casings…if in doubt, let the microscope help!

Happy Hunting!