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Message from the Lee's Summit R-7 School District Health Services Department

As colder weather continues, students will be bundling up at school with coats, gloves, scarves and hats. The Lee's Summit R-7 Health Services Department would like to take this opportunity then to inform/remind parents about head lice, a health issue sometimes experienced within the school year. Please note the delivery of this information home is not an indicator that infestation within the R-7 School District and at individual schools is above normal this school year.

Head lice, which are small parasitic insects, are a common occurrence among children. Generally found close to the scalp, usually around the ears and back of the neck, the adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed and can be the color of a child's hair. Nits, or eggs, are smaller and silver in color. It is noteworthy that head lice **do NOT** spread disease and **are NOT** related to hygiene or cleanliness.

How do children get head lice?

Children acquire head lice mainly by direct head-to-head contact with an infected person. If someone in your child's class at school develops head lice, there is no reason to automatically assume that your child will "catch" head lice.

How can head lice be prevented?

It is virtually impossible to prevent all head lice infestations. Parents should be aware of the signs and symptoms of head lice and are encouraged to check their children's heads for lice periodically, before and after sleep-overs and if the child is symptomatic. If a person is identified with head lice, all household members should be checked for head lice.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), screening for nits alone is not an accurate way of predicting which individuals are or will become infested, and mass screenings for live lice have not been proven to have any significant effect on the incidence of head lice in school communities.

What are symptoms of head lice?

Most cases of head lice in children begin without any symptoms. The most common symptom is itching, which is caused by an allergic reaction to the louse saliva. However, itching may not occur until after four to five weeks of infestation.

How are head lice diagnosed?

The gold standard for diagnosing head lice is finding of a live louse on the head, which can be difficult because lice avoid light and can crawl quickly. If your child is scratching his or her head and you see bugs or nits on the scalp, he or she should be examined by a medical professional.

What is the treatment for head lice?

Treatment should occur only when active (crawling) lice or viable eggs (nits that are ¼ inch or closer to the scalp) are observed. Effective treatments include over-the-counter products and prescription medication. Alternative therapies, such as natural and herbal remedies, also exist but they have not been proven effective and are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). In addition, nit picking (hair combing) with a fine-tooth comb is often used to remove the nits from the hair. This combing takes time and patience. While nit picking may remove the eggs or empty shells, it is not considered an effective treatment for head lice if used in isolation.

Please note that many approved products are safe and effective but, like all medical treatments, must be used exactly as directed. As a result of new evidence based on the life cycle of lice, many medical professionals now recommend routine re-treatment on day 9.

For more information

For more information about head lice at your child's school, please contact your School Nurse.