

Style Plus

Creatures

Getting Bugged to the Limit

By Donna Jacobs
Special to The Washington Post

"The first time that I was aware of lice was the day I picked up my 3-year-old son from nursery school," says Deborah Altschuler. "He had been sitting in the corner the entire morning."

The staff discovered that he had head lice and, unable to reach her by telephone, segregated him.

"I was quite upset," she says. "I am fastidious."

She took her son home—to the middle-class Boston suburb of Newton—and immediately inspected her 5-year-old son. He had them, too. "I then had myself checked, and I, as well, had lice."

That was October 1982. Altschuler's pediatrician gave her a prescription for a lindane-based shampoo. Lindane is a pesticide. She cleaned an already clean house. "Two weeks later, I checked my kids and found that they had it all over again. And so did Mommy."

This repeated itself four times, the last time Thanksgiving Day. "I was expecting company from out of town. And 45 minutes before they were to arrive, I was bathing the boys and found, once again, that they had lice."

"I sat down. I cried. I carried on. I told my husband that I would not send our children back to the public school because until the school did something, they were just going to get it again and again. And their brains would be pickled by the time they were in third grade from all this garbage that we had to put on their heads."

Until then, Altschuler, 37, who has a degree in education, had told herself that her children really didn't have lice—just eggs. And that itching—well, it was from having something in their hair, like sand. "It never occurred to me that the itching was from the sucking of the louse."

Lice are blood-sucking insects. They puncture the skin and pump out blood. Human head lice can only survive on human blood; without it they die.

Altschuler, whose husband is an investment manager, researched the biology and effective, safe treatment of head lice in a medical library. But she was unable to convince an indifferent local health department that hundreds of families were in a situation similar to hers. After all, head lice are not a reportable disease and few families would volunteer the embarrassing information to authorities.

So she and Leslie Kenney, a mother of two girls and the wife of a psychologist, phoned pharmacies in Newton. In the first 12 weeks of school, the druggists had filled 1,650 prescriptions for one lice shampoo alone—each prescription probably used by two people. Newton has an elementary school population of 5,000.

These statistics finally got the attention of the local government. But Altschuler and Kenney decided the best way to cure the head lice outbreak was to go public with it. They formed Parents Against Lice and newspapers picked up the story.

"That's when all hell broke loose," says Altschuler. "We started getting letters from Hawaii and all the way across. And it has not stopped."

Altschuler estimates that 10 million Americans have head lice each year and they buy at least \$100 million worth of lotions and shampoos to combat it.

Head lice in the United States, says University of Massachusetts medical entomologist John Edman, constitutes "a national epidemic."

"You talk to school nurses, read articles, look at how many cans of Rid and what-have-you are sold, ask pharmacists about the preparations bought and it is obviously a very important problem. In many cases, departments of public health from federal on down to the state level are taking a very biased attitude."

Edman says, however, that Altschuler and Kenney themselves are doing the job. "They are having an impact on preventing the spread, and on policies for dealing with lice."

The two women now have Lice-buster T-shirts—with a big black louse in the center—that they encourage licebusters across the country to wear when they check school children.

Altschuler and Kenney have changed the name to the National Pediculosis (the medical term for lice infestation) Association to reflect their national network. They say they get 50 letters a day and are active in 47 states.

Their efforts are financed by \$25,000 in donations from individuals and from such companies as Polaroid, Stop and Shop (which owns the MediMart drugstore chain), Zayre and the Purdue Frederick and Pfizer pharmaceutical companies.

Their association sponsored a clinical evaluation of the five most common shampoos and lotions used to kill lice. David Taplin, professor of dermatology and epidemiology at the University of Miami medical school, did the study.

"I think we could claim a spot in the Guinness World Book of Records for nitpicking," says Taplin, who as head of the field epidemiological survey team has spent the last five years working on head lice and scabies. "We have picked out, and examined, 18,000 nits [lice eggs] and 5,000 to 8,000 nymphs [immature lice] and adults."

He tested Prioderm, Rid, A-200, R&C and Kwell. His findings: All of the products killed louse nymphs and adults. With Prioderm, a malathion lotion, only one percent of lice eggs remained alive after treat-



Licebusters organizers Deborah Altschuler, left, and Leslie Kenney with five of their Massachusetts recruits.

ment. Rid lotion, A-200 lotion and shampoo, R & C shampoo (all containing pyrethrin, an extract of chrysanthemums) and lindane-based Kwell shampoo left about 30 percent of nits alive and able to hatch and reproduce.

In the hierarchy of prestigious research, lice rank low. "Scientists look down their noses," says Taplin, "when you're picking nits and lice out of people's heads."

Whereas head lice in the United States have resulted in primarily a financial drain, they are a serious public health problem in tropical countries. "Children have infected sores all over their heads; they are distressed and fevered and may get kidney problems."

"It is not," says Taplin, "a trivial subject."

In the U.S., head lice infestation is not considered an acute medical problem. Only in severe infestations will children possibly suffer swollen underarm or neck glands, or bacterial infection. The worst problem is usually psychological. Children feel like "outcasts," Taplin says.

"Their head itches. They can feel these things crawling on their heads at night."

"It's a disease primarily of kindergarten, first- and second-graders. At this age, they play head to head. Their hats and coats hang next to one another, or land on a clothing heap. They share clothes and combs."

Lice are also an affliction primarily of suburban middle- and upper-class families. "You rarely see head lice on American black children," says Taplin, "partly because the claw of American lice is not adapted to the oval hair of curly-haired blacks."

"Head lice," he adds, "are nothing to be ashamed of. They are as attracted to a clean head as a dirty one. Anyone can have lousy kids."

Meanwhile, lice seem to be gaining in social chic. Bloomingdale's had scheduled a panel discussion on the subject this month at Boston's Chestnut Hill mall.

Donna Jacobs is a free-lance writer specializing in animal behavior.

The Facts of Lice

■ Head lice are about the size of a sesame seed, and usually light brown.

■ Females live an average of 27 days; males 16 days.

■ The female lays five to eight eggs each day, for a potential lifetime total of 300.

■ The yellowish white eggs, or nits, are only one millimeter, or 4/100ths of an inch, and cling to a hair shaft.

■ The colorless newly hatched nymphs are the size of the period at the end of this sentence. They feed immediately. After three molts in a week, they become adults.

■ The bite of the louse causes itching and infection because of our allergic reaction to a protein in the louse's saliva. Some people are immune; others gain immunity after many bites.

■ They do not fly, as some people believe, but are capable of running as fast as nine inches a minute.

■ Their nickname: cooties.

■ Scientists believe that lice inhabited the bodies of our hairy ancestors and, as we became less hirsute, some moved upward to our tresses.

■ They can be fussy. "On some of us, they do very well," says University of Miami Medical School Prof. David Taplin. "But a lady on our field research team kills every louse you put on her."

The researchers are trying to find out why.

Because head lice are not a "reportable condition," the federal Centers for Disease Control doesn't keep statistics on the number of cases. However, CDC medical entomologist James Stewart says that autumn is the time of year cases of head lice are most prevalent.

"With schools starting up, and kids sharing hats and combs, this is when we get the most calls about head lice."

In the Washington area, school systems are generally reporting fewer cases this year than in years past, but no one is denying that head lice exist. "We always have our fair share," says Dr. Florence Fenton, supervisor of Health Education and Health Services for Prince George's County Public Schools.

In Montgomery County, 22 of the 100 elementary schools have reported at least one case since the beginning of the school year, although a spokesperson characterized that as "way down from last year at this time." Both the District and Arlington County public schools also report fewer cases.

Seriousness of the problem nationally, say parents and representatives of the National Pediculosis Association, varies between schools and states.

Solutions & Resolutions

Among recommendations and findings of Licebusters (the National Pediculosis Association):

■ Schools and day care centers should check for lice "right away"—at the beginning of the school year.

■ Removal of nits (eggs) is essential.

■ Children should not be allowed back into school until all nits are removed.

■ The Innomed comb—with built-in magnifying glass—is believed to be the most effective.

■ Rugs and furniture should be vacuumed to pick up hairs with nits clinging to them. Don't use pesticidal sprays. "We hear of too many mothers spraying their children and cribs," says Deborah Altschuler.

■ Launder all bedding and clothes, including hats and coats, in hot water and a hot dryer, or dry clean them.

■ Itching is caused initially by the bite of the louse, but the lice-killing preparations also cause itching. Don't reapply them just because a child's head itches.

■ Pesticide-based shampoos and lotions should not be used on infants and should be treated with respect. Both lindane and pyrethrin are "contact poisons"—absorbed through the skin," says

Massachusetts entomologist John Edman. But according to University of Miami medical school professor David Taplin and others, "They're safe if used properly."

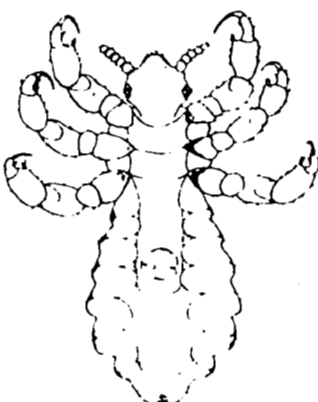
Through efforts of the Massachusetts-based organization, a resolution on proper drug labeling was passed by the 1984 U.S. Conference of Mayors and forwarded to the U.S. Congress for study. The resolution calls for, in part, pharmaceutical manufacturers to "adopt clear and responsible labeling instructions" that advise users of hazards to children, pregnant women and nursing mothers.

RESOURCES

■ National Pediculosis Association, P.O. Box 149, Newton, Mass. 02161. Hotline: (617) 449-NITS. Prevention packet and poster, \$5. Also available in Spanish and Vietnamese.

■ To request translations of lice information in other languages, write: Ann Nowak, 18925 Kilt Terrace, Olney, Md. 20832.

■ 13-minute videotape, "Life That Lives Upon Us: Head Lice," produced for parents and teachers, available for a fee. Prof. David Taplin, University of Miami School of Medicine, P.O. Box 016960, R-117, Miami, Fla. 33101.



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