

Lice tops seasonal Halloween creepy crawlies

October 17 2011

Autumn brings tales of scary delight, but none terrifies parents so much as the note home from school that a case of lice has been detected.

“While the make-believe vampires are prowling for candy, head [lice](#) are looking for a real blood meal,” said Dr. Andrew Bonwit, a pediatric infectious disease expert at Loyola University Health System. “Lice grip the hair shaft while biting into the scalp to feed on blood.”

But Bonwit said the bite will rarely, if ever, be painful. It is more likely to itch. “Lice cause more emotional distress than any real physical harm,” he said. “The infestation is usually a nuisance and almost never a serious problem in itself.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an estimated 6 million to 12 million infestations occur each year in the United States among children 3 to 11 years of age.

“Parents and school staff may become understandably upset by outbreaks of head lice, but it is important to remember that if the problem occurs, it is treatable, although repeat applications of medicine are usually needed,” said Bonwit, an assistant professor, pediatric infectious disease, Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

Bonwit’s Top Tall Tales about Lice

Myth 1 Lice are caused by being dirty. “Personal hygiene and

socioeconomic status have nothing to do with having or transmitting head lice. The head louse is an equal-opportunity pest!"

Myth 2 Pets spread lice. "Animals are not known to carry head lice nor to transmit them to people."

Myth 3 Beware sharing hairbrushes and personal items to avoid lice. "Although it's probably best not to share such items as combs, hairbrushes and hats, these do not seem to transmit the pest. Transmission of lice seems to occur only by direct head-to-head contact from one person to another."

Myth 4 Kids with lice should be sent home from school immediately. "The American Academy of Pediatrics does not endorse "no-nit" policies that exclude children from school because nits are present. In fact, even the presence of mature head lice is not considered a valid reason to exclude children, only a cause for prompt referral to the physician for treatment."

Myth 5 Lice carry disease. "[Head lice](#) do not transmit serious infectious disease."

The Truth about Lice

"Lice are very small, about the length of George Washington's nose on a quarter," Bonwit said. "The lice produce eggs, called nits, which become strongly cemented to the host's hair shafts." When an infestation occurs, live lice may be visible and the nits may be seen as tiny, dark dots on the side of the hair shafts. "Sometimes the patient has been so itchy that he or she scratches the scalp to the point of minor skin infections and even causing some enlarged lymph nodes on the back of the neck or behind the ears," Bonwit said. "While these changes may alarm [parents](#), they aren't directly harmful." A child's physician can prescribe remedies to

clear up those secondary problems.

Getting Rid of Lice

The most common treatment is over-the-counter or prescription insecticidal shampoos or lotions applied to the scalp, left on for a specified time and rinsed off. Using a fine-toothed comb to remove as many “nits” or eggs as possible helps prevent further infestation.

“The life cycle is about seven days from the laying of the eggs to the hatching, so a second insecticide treatment is recommended, after the first application,” Bonwit said. “If the treatments are used as directed, problems other than scalp irritation are unlikely to occur.”

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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