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## Nothing nice about lice

When kids put their heads together, the little critters can spread. Then what? Who ya gonna call? LiceBeaters!

## Lice aren't so nice

When kids put their heads together, the little critters can spread, then what?

BY PAT BURSON

[pat.burson@newsday.com](mailto:pat.burson@newsday.com)

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Global warming has been blamed for floods, famine and higher prices at the gas pump.

But head lice?

A theory circulating among some parents of school-age kids is that warmer-than-usual fall temperatures may be responsible for a recent outbreak on Long Island.

But health officials and lice-removal experts say more likely the cause is your child's head making direct contact with another child's head or hair that's already infested with the bugs and their eggs, or nits.

"I don't know of anything that talks about weather and lice. I'd say that that's just bad information out there," says Jeffrey Hammond, a spokesman for the New York State Health Department. "It's transmitted person to person through direct contact."

And that can happen while they're sitting together in class, playing on the playground, swapping hair brushes or ribbons in the rest room or at a sleepover, taking an afternoon nap at preschool or whispering secrets in each other's ears. In other words, pretty much anywhere, and everywhere and every year.

If your kids haven't had a case of lice yet, count yourself lucky -- for now. If you've been through it already, you know how hard it can be to get rid of the critters once they've made a home on your child's head.

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But there are ways, from over-the-counter shampoos to doctor-prescribed medications to natural home remedies. You can do it on your own or hire people who have the know-how and make their living nit-picking.

### **Lice, yikes! Now what?**

A Deer Park mother was alarmed when the school nurse called to say her 8-year-old daughter was being sent home -- her hair and scalp were infested with head lice.

And it turned out that the pesky parasites had made themselves at home on the heads of at least five other third-graders in the girl's classroom, the mother said. When she called her 6-year-old daughter's school, she discovered the younger one had them, too.

Head lice is nothing new: It's a perennial nuisance among school-age children -- and a cause for mortification for many parents. (The Deer Park mother, for example, did not want her name used.)

It might be satisfying to blame the warm weather or someone's poor hygiene for outbreaks, but it doesn't work that way, says Jeffrey Hammon, a spokesman for the state Health Department. Kids become infested with head lice by having direct head-to-head contact with other kids who have them -- no matter what the weather.

But with the school year well under way, now seems as good a time as any to confront the itchy possibilities of contracting lice.

First, some information.

Head lice, formally known as *pediculus humanus capitis* (peh-DICK-you-lus HUE-man-us CAP-ih-TUS), are parasites found in the hair and on the scalp of humans. The adult louse feeds off the blood from the scalp and lays eggs called nits, which stick to the hair shaft close to the scalp. When the eggs are newly hatched, the lice are called nymphs.

Telltale signs include itching and scratching around the ears and the nape of the neck. Experts say infestations have nothing to do with a child's personal cleanliness.

Regardless, most parents are horrified at the thought of microscopic critters living on their children's heads.

The Deer Park mom tried an over-the-counter product, but when it didn't work, she searched the Internet and found LiceBeaters, a Long Island-based outfit run by two women who make their living ridding heads of lice. They are part of a small cadre of providers in the metro area who, for a fee, offer such a service.

LiceBeaters Wendy Beck of Roslyn and Penny Good of Baldwin, who have been professional nit-pickers for 10 years, say parents call them when they've tried store-bought or doctor-prescribed remedies that haven't worked or they've gotten rid of the lice, only to have them return.

## Long, slow process

No matter who does it, de-lousing is a painstaking and sometimes costly process, depending on the length of the treatment and severity of the infestation. What works best? Opinions vary. Hammon, the health department spokesman, recommends treating head lice with products containing pyrethrins, a compound used as an insecticide, which can be found at the drug store, or consulting a physician, who can prescribe a lice-removal treatment.

Others swear by all-natural home remedies.

Beck, who has a biology degree, and Good, who has a psychology degree, charge about \$300 for their three-week treatment and in-home visit.

While many have success at home with pharmaceutical treatments, Good and Beck say in their experience, many are not 100-percent effective. "None of those products ever kill the nits, and ... the nits must be removed. If you leave them on the hair and they hatch in the next few days, you have the next generation of bugs crawling through your hair," Good says. They warn that some products also may contain pesticides and other ingredients that certain children may be allergic to.

Their three-week treatment involves saturating their client's hair with olive oil at intervals coinciding with the life cycle of lice. "The olive oil suffocates the baby bug before it becomes old enough to lay eggs," Beck says.

On the day of the Deer Park treatment, they arrived at the woman's house to check her daughters' heads. While there, they checked the woman, her husband and their son, 2, to see if the lice had spread. They hadn't.

Shining light from two lamps onto the girls' heads, Beck and Good went through each one's shoulder-length hair, section by section. They dragged a metal nit comb through the strands, wiping the comb after each pass on a white paper towel to see if any nits or bugs appeared. Wearing magnifying eyeglasses, they also closely examined each girl's hair and scalp, combing and hand-picking out any nits that remained.

Manually removing any eggs from the hair is key, they say, because the nits won't fall out on their own. They say it takes one to three hours to do, depending on the severity of the infestation.

Afterward, they washed the girls' hair in the kitchen sink with a grease-cutting dishwashing liquid. Then they blew the hair dry and removed any remaining nits.

## Try ponytails

After an hour or so, Good and Beck issued the all clear and gave the girls' parents instructions for avoiding a reinfestation. For example, they recommended the mother

pull back the girls' hair into braids or a ponytail so the hair isn't flying around loose, and "dirtying" up the hair with a little hairspray or kids' hair gel since "lice love clean heads," Good said. They also instructed the parents to wash the bedding and hair accessories, and vacuum floors and furniture.

"I did everyone's laundry, stripped beds, vacuumed mattresses and couches and bagged up their stuffed animals in black garbage bags," the mother said. "Looking online, they suggest -- I forget where -- to bag them up for two weeks, and that I have done. And a lot of vacuuming."

Above all, the LiceBeaters said, parents should tell other parents when their kids have head lice, and kids also need to tell their friends so that the bugs don't continue to spread.

"The big problem is a lot of people don't want anybody to know," Beck says. "They'll get rid of them, and they won't tell their friends because they're embarrassed." After all the bugs are dead and gone, parents should remain vigilant, continuing to check their children's heads once a week.

"There is no one-day cure for head lice," Good says. "We live in a society where people want it to be resolved in a day. But it's not a quick fix."

### **More than you ever wanted to know about head lice**

They infest the hair, feed on blood from the scalp -- the feeding sites are what causes the itching, especially around the ears and at the back of the head -- and lay their eggs (also called nits).

They are transmitted primarily by close contact with the head or head hair of an infested person. They also can be transmitted by sharing personal items, such as combs, hair brushes, hats or other articles of clothing carrying adult lice or infested strands of hair.

An adult louse measures about 1/8 inch long and is yellowish-gray. Nits are oval-shaped, about 1/3 inch long and cling to one side of the hair shaft, usually close to the scalp. They are white when first laid, turning a coffee color after they hatch. Newly hatched eggs are called nymphs.

The female louse lays about a half-dozen eggs a day. It takes the eggs from 7 to 11 days to hatch and another two weeks to develop into reproducing adult lice. Lice live up to 30 days and spend their entire life on the human head. If they move to other surfaces they must return to the head within a few hours to survive.

To prevent lice from multiplying and spreading, the adults and nits must be killed. If you don't kill all the live bugs and remove their eggs, it's likely you'll become reinfested.

Parents should routinely check their children's heads for lice and nits.

They are not a reason to panic or take extreme measures, like fumigating your home. Wash bed linens and vacuum carpets and furniture.

They are not a sign of uncleanliness.

They can infest anyone, no matter the person's color, age, gender or socioeconomic level.

They are not something to be ashamed of.

They do not carry serious diseases, but persistent scratching can cause skin irritation if left untreated.

They can't jump, fly or hop.

They can't live on pets.

For more, go to the Centers for Disease Control site: [cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/lice/default.htm](http://cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/lice/default.htm)[dcd.gov](http://dcd.gov)

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