

Got Lice? Get Educated.

By Jean Follmer



Nits in hair

Have you heard? Head lice have spread through some Lamorinda schools like wildfire this year. Chances are you know of at least one family who has dealt with this dreaded bug. Do you frantically search your child's hair for nits and lice when a notice is sent home saying a student in your child's class has lice? Do you really know what you're looking for? People generally don't like to discuss head lice due to the stigma that is unfortunately attached to it. Did you know that head lice prefer to live in very clean places? It's time to stop being embarrassed and get educated about lice.

First of all, what are head lice? They are insects that live on the human head and feed on blood from the scalp. They develop in three stages: nit – egg, nymph – young louse hatchling and adult louse. Lice lay their eggs on the human hair shaft where it can be flexible and not wash away easily. The eggs are attached with a glue-like substance that makes them difficult to remove. According to Wikipedia, a louse lives for about four weeks and a female louse will lay between 50 and 100 eggs (nits). Lice generally favor the nape of the neck and behind the ears for colonization because they are repelled by light. Adult lice can move very quickly and are difficult to see because they run for shadows when they bite, they often cause the scalp to itch and persistent scratching may lead to an infection.

What exactly do you look for? Generally speaking, a female louse lays its eggs within 1 centimeter of the scalp surface. They are very small and are gray, brown or gold in color. They cannot be easily flicked off the hair shaft like dandruff can. Once the nit hatches, the shell it leaves behind appears white. Springhill Elementary parent Mailana Mavromatis-Broumand owns the Love Bugs lice removal salon in Lafayette. She says when a nymph "first hatches (they call them "teenagers") it is black. As it gets bigger, their stomachs are transparent, so they appear brown when they are full of blood."

What do you do if you think you have a case of lice in your home? Families take many different approaches, some of which are more effective than others. There are over-the-counter lice pesticide products like "Rid" available. While these products may kill most hatched lice, they don't remove nits. Nits can only be successfully removed by combing the hair thoroughly with a lice comb. Mavromatis-Broumand says the lice that aren't killed by pesticide products essentially receive a vaccination and those lice won't respond to further pesticide treatments. Love Bugs Salon uses and advocates safer, non-toxic products to kill lice and combing to remove nits. Mavromatis-Broumand says "The key to lice removal is patience and persistence."

You literally need to become a "nit-picker" and you need to nit pick and check daily until the hair and scalp are completely clear of nits and lice. This can be done at home by putting on a pair of magnifying glasses and using a bright light. Divide the hair with clips to section the hair and go through it strand by strand. Many people soak the hair in olive oil or other oil based product because it makes combing easier. Be prepared to spend hours doing this. A Los Perales mother said "My daughter had lice and it ruled my life for about a month." You have to check everyone in the house, including the nanny! Or, you can go to Love Bugs Salon and have the nits and lice removed there. They offer a free consultation to determine whether or not nits or lice are actually present.

Mavromatis-Broumand named her salon Love Bugs "because I wanted it to be a positive experience." She wants kids to look back on having lice in their childhood and think it wasn't a big deal and hopefully remove the stigma that surrounds it. Mavromatis-Broumand said "some parents get angry with their children" for having lice. It's not the child's fault and it's not a result of being dirty. Mavromatis-Broumand says her



"biggest client base are the most affluent neighborhoods in the Bay Area." She had clients driving to Lafayette from Palo Alto, so recently opened another location there.

Prevention you ask? There are definitely some steps to take to avoid a case of head lice. Some of them include avoiding physical contact with a person who has lice and not sharing brushes, hats, pillows, stuffed animals or other personal items. The Lafayette School District has recently updated its lice policy and Happy Valley Elementary parent Anouschka Wardy has been very involved with the process. She said Superintendent Dr. Frank Tom "has been very receptive to me. He invited me to go and talk with him." Since school seems to be ground zero for lice transmission, she is "hoping to accomplish a parent volunteer program" in which parents are trained to check for head lice. She said the Piedmont school district has a very effective program in which parent volunteers check all students in August, after winter break and after spring

break. Since the program was implemented, she said Piedmont has seen a drastic reduction in the number of lice cases.

Burton Valley Elementary nearly had a similar program up and running, but they weren't able to move forward due to privacy concerns. Many parents didn't want other parents checking their child's hair for lice. Wardy said "One parent made the comparison that we have all these parents in the classroom helping and they have to be discreet" about those activities, so why can't discretion be required in the case of head checks? In Piedmont, "parents are trained, sign confidentiality agreements and don't chat about it". Wardy also mentioned that Glorietta Elementary has had good results after hiring a lice removal consultant. Further, Wardy says it's imperative for the schools to aid in getting rid of lice by "removing pillows and stuffed animals and not having sweaters hanging over the backs of chairs." The students themselves need to be educated about lice transmission because girls play with each other's hair and they have daily contact with one another. Lafayette Elementary parent Ann Johnston said "We had a number of kids in the 4th grade that came down with lice. Parents are reluctant to report it to the school out of embarrassment." Johnston was "really excited to learn of Anouschka who was very willing to help the district and the Board was very open to her suggestions." Additionally, most of the schools in the Lafayette district have purchased personal headphones for each of their students.

Again, we need to stop being embarrassed about head lice. You or your child may get lice and it really won't be the end of the world. The school districts are working hard to get lice out of their schools and part of that success involves parents being proactive and informed. In the words of Mailana Mavromatis-Broumand, there needs to be "patience and persistence" on the part of all parties.