**Creepy crawlers**

Head lice are quite common—and nothing to be ashamed of

by Donna D’Amour



Just hearing the words “head lice”

can leave you with that creepy-crawly

feeling.

Lice are often thought of as a health

issue, but in reality they are more of

a social concern. “There is certainly

no health risk connected to head lice,”

says Joan Mikkelsen, a public health

nurse who works in the school health

program in Nova Scotia’s Capital Health

district, which includes Halifax and the

surrounding areas.

Lice are parasites that need blood

to feed, but they can survive without

feeding for three days. Nits—lice eggs

that are stuck to strands of hair—need a

warm environment, usually close to the

scalp, to survive.

“Lice don’t fl y or hop or jump, but

they crawl quickly, so the most common

transmission of lice occurs through

head-to-head contact,” says Mikkelsen.

For elementary school-aged children,

head-to-head contact is not unusual.

There’s another myth about lice to be

busted: “Lice infestations are absolutely

not a result of poor hygiene,” says

Mikkelsen. “Head lice can be found in

any facet of society. If you looked at

any elementary school in any part of

the world, you would find head lice.”

Schools are often blamed as the place

where lice are transmitted from child to

child, but Mikkelsen says lice can be just

as easily transmitted during sleepovers

at home, during play and by sharing

hats or hairbrushes. Mikkelsen says many children will

catch head lice at some point, and adds

that the key to dealing with the social

stigma of having a child with head lice

is for parents and schools to “normalize”

the situation. She cites, as an example,

a single father who called her for help

when he learned that his children had

head lice. He was very upset, but when

Mikkelsen asked the young daughter how she felt about what was happening,

she told Mikkelsen that she loved it when

her dad combed her hair as part of the

treatment. The girl’s father then saw the

situation in a different light.

When a child at school is identifi ed

as having head lice, parents are notifi ed

and sent a pamphlet outlining the

appropriate treatment. Parents or

guardians of other children in the class are notifi ed that there is a confi rmed

case of head lice, but the child is never

identifi ed. Keep in mind that adults can

also pick up head lice, so it’s a good idea

to check all family members as soon as

the lice are discovered.

Recently, the Halifax Regional School

Board changed its head lice policy,

based on advice from Capital Health’s

department of public health and the

position of the Canadian Paediatric

Society. “Previously, children could not

return to school until they were nit

free,” says Doug Hadley, coordinator of

communications for the school board.

“The revised policy allows students to

return to school once they have received

treatment and no longer have any live

lice. The amount of time a student

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misses from school due to lice has been

signifi cantly reduced with this policy.”

Mikkelsen thinks the revisions are a

step in the right direction. “The change

in policy has been a wonderful step

forward from the standpoint of public

health. Children were being stigmatized

and were missing way more education

days than necessary. With this new

policy, you can treat the child and have

them return to school the next day.”

The parent then repeats the treatment

in nine days. “That is a benefi t not only

to families, but also to school staff,” she

says, since kids will miss less school.

“Nobody is happy [to hear] that their

child has head lice,” says Mikkelsen,

“but if you keep at the treatment, in the

end, you will succeed.”



[Nitpicking: How to get rid of head lice](http://www.iwk.nshealth.ca/sites/default/files/Living_Healthy_Fall_2011_%28Web%29%20%281%29.pdf)

If lice are found on your child’s head, it’s important to

clean his or her personal belongings: bedding, combs,

hairbrushes, hair accessories, clothing and hats. Stuffed animals that can’t be washed can

be sealed in a plastic bag for 10 days, put in a hot dryer for 20 minutes or put in a freezer for

24 hours. Public Health Nurse Joan Mikkelsen then recommends that you use a pediculicide

shampoo or conditioner, available at any pharmacy (pediculus is Latin for louse). You should

repeat the treatment in nine days and use a fine-toothed comb daily, between treatments

to remove lice and nits. Continue checking your child and family members for three more

weeks.

If lice persist after the treatments, and you have followed the instructions for the

shampoo application and have done the daily combing, choose a treatment with a different

active ingredient. The pamphlet How to Prevent, Find, and Treat Head Lice (gov.ns.ca/hpp/

publications/07135\_HeadLicePamphlet\_En.pdf), which Public Health gives to parents and

schools in Nova Scotia, recommends looking for treatments that contain either permethrin,

found in products such as Nix or Kwellada-P, or pyrethrins with piperonyl butoxide, found in

products such as R&C, Pronto, Equate or Licetrol.