***Lice (Head) Pediculosis Fact Sheet***

**Cause:** *Pediculus humanus capitis,* a louse.

The life cycle of the louse is divided into three phases:

1. Nits: eggs laid by adult females and are cemented at the base of the hair shaft

nearest to the scalp, usually within 6 mm. Takes 1 week to hatch. Difficult to

see but are oval and usually yellow to white.

2. Nymph: hatched egg; resembles an adult but much smaller; matures in 9 - 12

days. Must feed on blood to survive.

3. Adult: louse grows to about the size of a sesame seed, has 6 clawed legs, and

is tan to grayish-white. It can live up to 30 days on the infested head and

needs to feed on blood several times per day; it will die within 1-2 days off the

host.

Lice infestation is most common in children 3 to 12 years of age. Girls get head

lice more often than boys, women more often than men. They are found most

commonly on the scalp behind the ears, at the nape of the neck. They are rarely

found on the body, eyelashes, or eyebrows.

**Symptoms:** Itching of the scalp and neck. Look for:

Crawling lice in the hair, usually few in number

Eggs (nits) glued to the hair, often found at the back of the neck

Scratch marks on the scalp or back of neck at hairline

**Spread:** By direct contact with the head of another infested person. Indirect spread through

contact with personal belongings of an infested person (as, combs, brushes, hats,

scarves, bedding) is less likely but can occur. Transmission most often occurs

among household members because of the close proximity of living conditions.

Lice do not jump or fly; they crawl and can fall off the head. Lice do not live longer

than 48 hours off the head. They lay their eggs only while on the head. Nits which

are more than ¼” from the scalp are dead or empty and will not hatch. Also, eggs

do not hatch if they have fallen off. Lice do not spread to or from pets as they do

not become infested. However, pets may carry the lice from one person to

another. Avoid close contact with pets and refrain from permitting animals to sleep

with household members during an infestation. Do not treat animals with

medicines for humans.

**Incubation Period:** Eggs (nits) hatch in 7 – 10 days

**Period of Communicability:** Until treated with lice – killing medication. Crawling forms of the louse are communicable; the nits are not.

**Diagnosis:** Head lice infestation is confirmed by inspecting the scalp and hair for the presence

of nits, nymphs or live adult lice. Finding a nymph or an adult louse may be difficult

because there are few of them and they move very quickly. If nits are visible

farther than 6 mm from the scalp and no nymphs or adult lice are seen, the

infestation is a past infestation and does not require treatment. If nits are

discovered in the hair, but live lice are not seen, they can be re-inspected

periodically for live lice. Adequate lighting should be used for the inspection as

well as disposable sticks used to adequately separate the hair. A thorough

examination may take several minutes.

**Treatment:** Pediculicides, either lice-killing shampoo or lotion, either purchased over-the counter or by prescription (from a physician). Instructions must be followed

carefully. Shampooing should be rinsed off over a sink rather than in a shower or

tub, and with cool rather than warm water, to reduce skin absorption of the

pediculicides. Do not use crème rinse before doing the treatment.

If live lice are seen after treatment, try a different brand. For some medications, a second treatment is needed 7 – 10 days later to kill nits that have survived the first treatment.

Remove nits from the hair with a fine-toothed comb. Wait 1-2 days before shampooing the hair but then shampoo at least twice a week for 2 weeks. Vigorously combing out the wet hair seems to slow down the lice. Avoid over-use of pediculicides to avoid toxic exposure.

**Prevention/Control:**

1. Avoid sharing hair care items, towels, bedding, clothing, hats, and headgear.

2. Hang clothing in individual lockers or on assigned coat hooks. Hooks should

be spaced at least 12 inches apart so that clothing does not touch.

3. Clean items such as clothing, furniture or carpeting that have come in contact

with the head of the infested person in the 24 to 48 hours before treatment.

Wash, soak or dry items at temperatures 130º F to kill stray lice or nits.

Furniture, carpeting, car seats, etc., may be vacuumed. Items that cannot be

washed can be dry cleaned or bagged in plastic for 2 weeks, by which time any

nits that may have survived would have hatched and nymphs would be without

food source. Pediculicide spray should not be used because the chemical

exposure cannot be controlled. Nits are unlikely to incubate and hatch at room

temperatures. Major cleaning measures are unnecessary.