Recognizing and Treating Head Lice: A Guide for Families

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Facts about head lice

- Head lice (*Pediculosis capitis*) are small insects that live on the heads of humans, laying their eggs on the scalp, and feeding on the blood of their hosts.

- Lice are not dangerous, but they are a nuisance, with their saliva often causing localized pruritus. Scratching can lead to secondary bacterial infections.\(^1\)

- Infestation is most common in children of preschool and elementary school-age, and their household contacts.\(^1\)

- Recently, there has been a surge in cases, partially due to increasing resistance to over-the-counter pediculicides.\(^2\)

- Proper diagnosis and treatment of head lice is important in decreasing costs and the spread of resistance, but many local families do not know when or how to treat.
Cost of head lice

- Head lice is not a reportable condition and there are many over-the-counter remedies available, making accurate estimates of prevalence difficult to obtain.

- A review from the 1990s demonstrated 6-12 million cases annually in the U.S., involving 2.6 million households with 8% of all schoolchildren infested. This report estimated annual costs in the U.S. at $367 million.\(^3\)

- Estimates of the annual cost of permethrin treatments alone in the U.S. are between $120-240 million.\(^4\)

- Widely published figures suggest an overall cost in the U.S. over $1 billion annually.\(^4,5\)
Community Perspective

- Makayla Carpenter, an LNA and the Assistant School Nurse at Morristown Elementary School, states that there is a surge in cases of head lice in the fall, when children are beginning to wear hats and jackets.

- Jordan Myerson, an RN and the Director of Nursing for the Lamoille South Supervisory Union (LSSU), feels that the schools have a decent handle on head lice with the procedures they have implemented, including a financial assistance program to aid families in obtaining lice treatments. However, he states that, “If we had a no-nit policy, we would have children who would never be in school.”

- Barbara Frankowski, a Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Vermont and past President of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Council on School Health feels that steps taken to normalize head lice in the community are important. She stated that, “Head lice infestation is a common thing that can happen to any child. It means that your child is social and has friends.”
Intervention

- Physicians at the Morrisville Family Health Center identified a lack of written information available to their patients and families.

- A pamphlet, with information focused on proper identification of head lice and treatment methods, was provided for distribution.
Response

- The response from both community members and physicians in Morrisville was positive. The physicians were excited to have a printout with information that could be easily distributed to parents with questions.
- One person mentioned that they appreciated that the pamphlet did not seem “clinical.”
- The LSSU Director of Nursing requested an electronic version of the pamphlet that could be shared with school administrators and nurses throughout Vermont.
Effectiveness and Limitations

As previously mentioned, it is difficult to obtain accurate estimates of prevalence for a condition that may be treated over-the-counter. Therefore, estimates of the impact of head lice in the local community are anecdotal only.

Due to time constraints, a method of measuring impact was not implemented. Considering that a baseline prevalence was not established, anecdotal reports of decreasing incidence in the schools would have to be considered to determine the effectiveness of this intervention.
Future Interventions

- In the future, projects can focus on establishing prevalence and education in the local elementary schools.

- Only schools in the Lamoille South region were contacted. Other schools in the county should be contacted to determine the impact of lice in those communities, and also to ensure that they allow children with remaining nits to return to school (as advised by the American Academy of Pediatrics).

- Jordan Myerson, the LSSU Director of Nursing would be an excellent contact point for determining the need for future projects benefiting the youth of Lamoille County.