



A PRIMER ON THE PESKY PESTS

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ILLUSTRATION BY JULIE GOODMAN

When my kids' school phoned me around noon, my stomach tightened. Which one of my two children might be sick, injured or in trouble?

As it turned out, the principal's secretary delivered entirely unexpected news.

"I'm afraid you'll have to come and pick up your daughter," she said. "We found nits in her hair during lice check."

Nits. Those are lice eggs. Lice eggs in my daughter's hair. (It took me a few seconds to register what this all meant.) That means that bugs have been crawling through my 9-year-old's silky blond locks ... so they might be crawling through my thick, curly hair, too. My hand instinctively went to my head to scratch an itch—real or imaginary—above my ear.

Surely there must be a mistake. We shampooed just last night! "Are you sure? Right now? Oh—" I bit my tongue and screwed my eyes shut, only to flash back on a memory buried some 20 years ago involving the up-close discovery of a public lice specimen. Its creepy-crawly legs and beady body made me scream at the time and shudder anew.

Then I pictured my daughter, confused and quarantined in the nurse's office. Poor baby. Would she hear any cootie jokes? I sighed into the phone. "I'll be right there."

FACT NUMBER ONE OF THE MANY FACTS I QUICKLY LEARNED ABOUT LICE: IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU SHAMPOO OR DON'T SHAMPOO. Squeaky-clean kids get lice. *Anybody* can get lice. Well, almost anybody. African Americans have a much lower incidence of lice because their predominant hair type has an oval-shaped hair shaft, which is harder for a louse to grasp. Except in Africa. There, lice—being the adaptable, persistent parasites that they

are—have evolved so that they can spread through black people's hair. I'll spare you the rest of the epidemiological research I dug up after lice temporarily put my life on hold. But in case you're wondering what "a louse" is, it's the singular of lice, like mouse is to mice.

Ten minutes later, I found myself sitting on a three-legged stool in the office at Havers Elementary School in Piedmont. My daughter seemed less upset about the discovery of the nits than I, probably because her school had shown students a video, *Adios to Lice*, to help demystify and de-stigmatize the whole topic. She looked curious and mildly amused as I took the hot seat while the school's chief lice checker (a saintly parent volunteer) picked through my scalp centimeter by centimeter, turning the curls I had gelled into submission into a brunette frizz ball. I felt my cheeks flush as I studied a handout of lice facts that showed a magnified photo of a louse in a forest of follicles, looking like a tan, stretched-out tick with six legs clustered near its head. Thankfully, the checker didn't find any sign of lice on me, but she had raised the bar on a Bad Hair Day nonetheless. I corralled the frizz into a ponytail, canceled plans for the afternoon, and took my daughter to the pharmacy to buy a toxic treatment and a fine-toothed comb.

After I got that call from the school last year and out of necessity became a quasi-expert on lice, I discovered that parents and school administrators throughout the East Bay have been scratching their heads and tearing out kids' nit-flecked hair in a Sisyphean effort to treat and re-treat lice. At Thornhill Elementary in Montclair, for example, nearly half the first-graders were infested with lice last fall, and their siblings helped spread them to other classrooms.

"We've beaten it, but it was a long haul, and it was nasty," says school secretary Kathy Jentile.

FACT NUMBER TWO: LICE IS ONE OF THOSE THINGS YOU GO THROUGH AND END UP SAYING, "IF ONLY I KNEW THEN WHAT I KNOW NOW." If you have kids who've been sharing helmets at summer camps or pillows at sleepovers, and they're about to go back to school or day care with kids who may harbor a louse or two, odds are they'll pick up lice sooner or later. It's not a real threat to health—the only symptom is an itchy scalp—but it is a real nuisance that costs time and money to treat. Do yourself a favor by learning about lice so you can catch the problem early on and keep it from spreading.

Let's start with the do's and don'ts I learned from my multiple mistakes.

- **Don't clean maniacally** When I got home after picking up my daughter, I turned into a Stepford wife on speed. *Lie* are lurking in the linen closet and on the couch, I thought. *Everything must be washed and vacuumed!* All towels, sheets and duvets. All upholstered cushions. Hairbrushes get run through the dishwasher. Stuffedies get suffocated. Yes, I took my kids' collection of stuffed animals—including those they hadn't cuddled for months—and wrapped them in plastic to smother any louse that might be hanging around. Only later—too late to save me the trouble—I read an American Academy of Pediatrics report on environmental interventions for lice, which dryly concluded, "Herculean cleaning measures are not beneficial." Oh, thanks. And why might that be? Because lice die approximately 24 hours away from their human host.

- **Do launder and vacuum** only those things that the person with lice has been ▶

No-Nit Policies: GOOD OR BAD?

Should schools screen for lice and keep those kids who have them out of the classroom? Parents, principals and medical experts disagree and are splitting hairs to back up their views.

On the one side are public districts such as Piedmont Unified and private schools such as Head Royce that have "no-nit" policies. With the help of parents, they routinely check for lice and send kids home for treatment until all the nits (the eggs) and lice are removed. On the other side is the Oakland Unified School District, which doesn't mandate lice screenings and dropped its no-nit policy in 2006. The Oakland district distributes information about lice and encourages parents to treat the condition, but it doesn't remove kids from class or require them to be nit-free before they return.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Association of School Nurses say districts such as Oakland are doing the right thing. Noting that lice are a nuisance but not a health threat, these groups concluded that lice screenings haven't been proven effective and that no-nit policies create unnecessary absences from school. A Harvard School of Public Health article lambasted no-nit policies for being "based on intolerance, hysteria and misinformation rather than on objective science."

Teresa Susman, the principal at Havens Elementary in Piedmont, has reviewed the research and still strongly supports her school's lice checks and no-nit policy. "I've been here 17 years, and when we didn't have a no-nit policy, a lot of kids did have infestations. Once we changed that and educated kids and parents, we've had very few," she says, adding that only a handful of her students have missed school for more than a half-day under the policy. Most go home midday, get treated, get rechecked the next day, and get cleared to go back to class. "My defense of it is that it works."

Similarly, Redwood Day, a private K-8 in Oakland, plans to keep its no-nit policy on the books. "We've decided there really isn't any way to get rid of lice unless you have this policy," says Beth Frankland, assistant head of school. "It's just cycle round and round unless the problem is addressed very seriously by every parent."

At Thornhill Elementary in Oakland, the OUSD's revised policy may have had the unintended consequence of fueling a lice outbreak last fall, which ultimately drained staff time and took kids out of the classroom. Ute Vogrinec, a parent at the school who became the unofficial "lice czar" after her daughter caught lice three times in as many months, says parents knew lice were going around early in the school year but didn't take the problem seriously enough. Come December, after the number of cases escalated, the school started calling parents and asking them to take kids with lice home for treatment right away in spite of the district's no-exclusion policy. "Instead of sending a few kids home in the beginning of the school year, Thornhill ended up sending almost half a class home at one point," she recalls.

But, adds Vogrinec, a no-nit policy by itself isn't the answer to the problem. "There have to be regular checks and lots of parent education to make it work. A lot of parents just did not know how to deal with it."

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in contact with recently. Hard-to-wash items can be bagged for 24 to 48 hours or put in a hot dryer for 30 minutes to kill lice.

- Don't use chemical treatments unnecessarily or excessively. An over-the-counter cream rinse such as Nix, which has a pesticide called *permethrin*, is the recommended treatment for lice. I bought a generic of RID with *pyrethrum*, which I didn't know at the time is more toxic but less effective. Go figure.

I shampooed and rinsed my daughter with the stuff, wondering how safe it could be if the bottle says "keep out of reach of children." (Answer: safe enough, but possibly risky if your child has allergies, or if you leave it on much longer than the directions advise, which some people do in an attempt to make it more effective. Log onto headlice.org for the pros and cons of treatment options.)

Later on in the shower, I impulsively applied it to my hair, too. "What the heck—just in case," I thought. But it's a bad idea to use these toxic treatments "just in case;" they should be used only when the live bugs have actually been found on the head. Plus, they are not terribly effective—they don't kill the eggs (nits) or even all the bugs (lice). Research shows about a third of the nits survive the chemical treatment and go on to hatch, and lice are becoming increasingly resistant to these pesticides. The only surefire way to get rid of the eggs and to catch every stray louse is to comb like crazy, manually pull them out, and keep checking and rechecking.

- In hindsight, I would not use Nix or RID at all, because it turns out my daughter had a very mild case—in fact, we never actually found any bug crawling on any family member's head, just a fresh-looking crop of nits that some louse must've laid before it moved on or died. Bottom line: If you have several lice crawling throughout your scalp, you probably need to treat the situation with heavy-duty stuff; but if it's nits alone, then don't bother with these products.

- No matter what, do nitpick—thoroughly and repeatedly. Nitpicking truly is a pain in the neck. My neck literally ached as I sat on an ottoman while my daughter sat cross-legged on the floor in front of me. Using clips to pin her hair into sections and a special metal comb designed to remove nits and lice, I went through her hair meticulously for at least an hour.

My husband sat nearby and did the same thing to our son's head while both kids watched a DVD.

We were armed with the right tools, but we lacked the most essential thing: a clear understanding of what we were looking for. I dutifully went through the motions of combing the strands, but as my eyes glazed over, I had a sinking feeling I couldn't tell a dandruff flake from a nit. I half hoped to see a louse scurrying along just to have a "Eureka!" moment that made it all worthwhile.

- Do know what to look for? A louse is a grayish or tan oblong critter with six legs, about the size of a sesame seed. A nit is an even tinier teardrop-shaped egg that varies in color from yellowish-white to brownish. A nit will cling to a piece of hair at an angle, looking like a microscopic leaf on a twig, and it won't budge—it's virtually glued on. If you find a speck of something near the scalp, then nudge or blow on it; if it moves, it's not a nit.

Nitpicking will make you appreciate the cliché "looking for a needle in a haystack." To make your job somewhat easier, do check for nits and lice outdoors in natural light. Don't nitpick at night with only 60 watts of light, like I did.

- Last but not least, do check frequently. Warn your kids to avoid head-to-head contact, and don't share hats or brushes.

In January, about six months after our first episode, the school called me again during the post-winter break lice screening to inform me my daughter had a new case of nits. Perhaps she picked up a louse while renting a ski helmet or while leaning her head against the upholstered seat at a movie theater—who knows? I just knew I wanted to get rid of all those eggs and kill any lingering louse once and for all. Feeling exasperated and incompetent, I turned to the pros at a delousing salon called NitPixies, which had recently opened near Montclair.

I clearly wasn't the only parent going nuts over nits, because NitPixies' business was booming within a week of opening in early January. While a trained technician in scrubs and a shower cap treated my daughter's hair with a nontoxic remedy and removed every single nit, the NitPixies owners gave me tips on what to look for. I learned that some nits are "nonviable"—dads that won't develop, or the leftover

shell from a hatched louse—but it's incredibly hard for a naked eye to tell the difference. The ones most likely to hatch a louse usually are located an inch or closer to the scalp, often at the base of the neck or behind the ears.

Having scaled the lice learning curve, I felt it my civic duty of sorts to volunteer as a lice checker at my kids' school. Havens Elementary was the scene of a lice outbreak in the mid-1990s, which in turn prompted the Piedmont Unified School District to adopt routine lice checks and a "no-nit" policy to send kids with nits or lice home to be treated. On the Friday following spring break, I joined 12 other parents in the multipurpose room and set to work as each class took turns filing through our individual stations, which were stocked with surgical gloves, long-stemmed swabs and a lighted magnifying glass.

I never thought I'd spend an entire morning inspecting the scalps of several dozen kids, peering at their hair follicles and picking behind their ears, but I quickly overcame the "ick" factor and found the process strangely satisfying. A kindergarten girl with shiny jet-black hair was my first "client." Using my gloved hand and the long stick of a swab, I separated her strands of hair and squinted at her shiny jet-black hair, which looked and smelled pristine. (The same can't be said of the sweaty fifth-graders who came in right after PE.) I didn't find any signs of lice on the heads I inspected, but the volunteer next to me pulled a louse off a boy.

Different schools have different procedures for dealing with lice, so don't count on your child's school to spot the problem before it escalates into a full-blown infestation. "What's really sad is when you have a family that spends the time and money to get it eradicated," says NitPixies co-owner Melissa Shilliday, "but then another family doesn't deal with it—or they shampoo one time with RID, thinking it's going to work, and it doesn't—and then it persists and keeps going around." She taught me her mantra: "Check your kids, check your kids, check your kids." As anyone who's gone through the trouble to make their household nit- and lice-free will tell you, you've gotta keep tackling this lousy problem head on. ■

The Nitpickers

Dina Shields and Melissa Shilliday, two Rockridge neighbors and friends, know what parents go through when their kids catch lice because both have children who brought lice home. "It seemed like weeks before we really got a handle on it," recalls Shields.

Adds Shilliday, "Lice literally turned my life upside-down. You can't put it off; you have to deal with it right then."

After the two became delousing experts last year, they harnessed their skills from the classroom and corporate world (Shields is a teacher; Shilliday is a former business executive) to open NitPixies last January. Their second salon, in San Rafael, opened early this summer.

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NitPixies looks like a regular hair salon—it has styling stations and a waiting area furnished with a modern flair—but the "stylists" wear scrubs and shower caps, and an industrial-sized washer holds a load of a client's bed linens. Kids watch portable DVDs on their laps while a pungent product is applied to their hair and a technician combs through their scalp, depositing lice and nits into a plastic container. Often parents sit for treatment too, wearing weary expressions on their faces and plastic coverings on their hair. The service costs \$100 per hour.

"What we're doing here is not rocket science—we're picking them out, one at a time—but we also show you how to do it and how to get lice out of your house," explains Shilliday. She and Shields studied nontoxic alternatives to chemical lice treatments before choosing a solution that mixes in lavender and tea tree oil.

The two never imagined they'd be entrepreneurs in this itch niche. "I sat on the board of Four Seasons Hotels for eight years," says Shilliday. "Everyone who knows me in that industry just laughs and goes, 'I can't believe you're doing this.'"

NitPixies is at 5009 Woodminster Lane, (510) 530-HAIR or www.nitpixies.com.

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