

10-18-04 Ann Arbor News “Your World” column submission:

Fall is back to school season, and unfortunately, it can also be the season of outbreaks of head lice. The incidence of head lice is on the rise, with 10 to 12 million lice infestations a year. It is now the most common communicable childhood disease, aside from the common cold.

Many misconceptions exist: head lice don't carry other diseases, they are not due to poor hygiene, and they only live on humans, not pets. Lice don't jump—they crawl—and they don't survive long off a person's head. So general proximity to an infected person is not a risk (but don't share things like hats and combs!).

Another misconception is that if a head lice shampoo has been FDA approved, it is relatively harmless. A case in point is the ingredient called Lindane.

Introduced as a chemical weapon in World War I, Lindane is a nerve killer which has been linked to seizures, cancer, and even death. It has been banned in most industrialized nations, and is no longer produced in the U.S., although it is still imported and sold here in prescription treatments for head lice and scabies.

Just one Lindane shampoo treatment washed down the drain can pollute 6 million gallons of water. Lindane doesn't break down, and can travel long distances. It is found in the fat of fish and mammals in the Arctic, where it poses a threat to the indigenous people who eat them.

Less toxic insecticide treatments are on the market. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends permethrin 1% (Nix). But it should not be used on women who are pregnant or nursing, or anyone who has a history of asthma. And unfortunately, studies show head lice in America are becoming resistant to insecticides, including permethrin, so if its application is not effective the first time, a stronger dose is not recommended.

The only truly non-toxic treatment for head lice is to carefully comb out the “nits” (lice eggs) with special fine-toothed metal lice combs. This treatment should be repeated daily for three weeks after the last live nit is found.

It is also important to wash and dry—at high temperature—everything that contacts the head: brushes, hats, barrettes, pillowcases, towels, etc. And, check at least weekly for nits on all others who come in contact with the infested person (60% of people who have lice don't realize it!).

Alternative non-toxic remedies are on market, but their efficacy has not been proven. For descriptions of other treatments, visit: www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice, or www.healthy.net/scr (search for “head lice”).

The Michigan Department of Community Health cautions against the use of the Lindane. Before you apply a lice or scabies treatment—check the ingredients. If it contains Lindane, consider an alternative. If you dispose of it, don't pour it down the drain! Instead, bring it to the Washtenaw County Household Hazardous Waste Collection Site, at 705 N. Zeeb Road, any

Saturday April through November, from 9 am to noon. For more information about this service, visit <http://recycle.ewashtenaw.org>.

Submitted by,

Barbara Lucas, Program Assistant
Washtenaw County Planning and Environment
Solid Waste Program
Phone: 734-222-6874
E-mail: lucasb@ewashtenaw.org