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Notes from a Rogue entomologist Cooties defined

BY RICHARD J. HILTON

As another election year draws near, it seems appropriate to write about blood-sucking parasites.

I am old enough to remember when the playground taunt "be careful or you'll get cooties" was commonplace. We even had the game "Cootie," where the goal was to construct an insect model. However, growing up I really had no idea what a cootie was. I thought it was a reference to germs in general and not to lice, the wingless blood-sucking insects. And due to my sheltered life as a youth and the widespread use of insecticides for louse control after World War II, I never had a close encounter with lice when I was in school. So it was a bit startling when our daughter came down with a case of head lice while at Jacksonville Elementary School.

These insects are obligate ectoparasites, meaning they have to be living on a host. In the case of head lice, the host is most often a child from 3 to 11 years old. Head lice live, as the name suggests, in the child's hair. A closely related species, the body louse, lives on clothing and is a vector of typhus. Body lice can become widespread during times of war and dislocation when soldiers and refugees are living in close quarters, often in very unsanitary conditions. Epidemic typhus was often a major cause of death in earlier times. Another louse that infests humans is the pubic louse, also known as the crab louse or simply crabs, and I will say no more on that topic. But, interestingly, neither head lice nor pubic lice are known to transmit disease.

Since young children, girls in particular, like to share clothes, hats, brushes, scrunchies and other hair-related accessories, it is no surprise that head lice can readily spread from one child to another. So, while my wife was

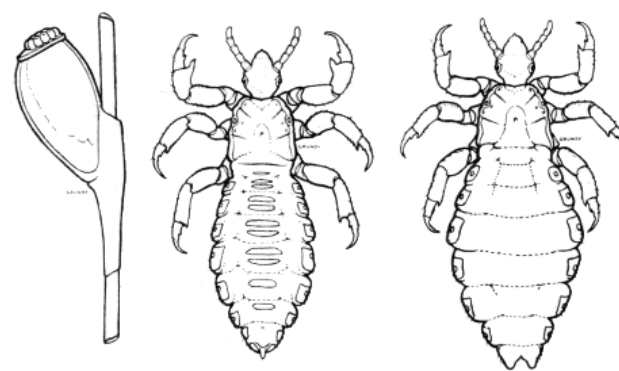
rather appalled by this occurrence, I will freely admit that I did find it somewhat fascinating. The fact that adults do not commonly get infested by head lice may have played a role in my dispassionate approach to this problem. This event did take place almost 20 years ago, and I recall that it was one of the first times that I really used the Internet to research a topic, finding that, while it was an incredible source of information, it was also full of bogus remedies. In other words, not much has changed on that score.

Since female lice glue their eggs, or nits, to the host's hair shaft close to the scalp, one obvious solution is to remove all the hair. Of course, shaving off your ten-year-old daughter's hair, while quick and easy, is not really a suitable option. So, while my wife was busy cleaning everything like crazy and using a special-order nit comb in painstaking fashion on our daughter's rather curly and luxuriant hair (and she did not particularly like to sit still at that age), I was running an experiment.

There were reports that head lice were becoming resistant to the standard over-the-counter shampoo treatment that included a pyrethrin insecticide. We were able to recover about three or four live adult lice from my daughter's scalp, and I proceeded to put some in



Head louse image from a scanning electron microscope (www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2480876/).



"Nit" or egg Adult male Adult female

Head lice nit and adults. The adults are between 2.5 and 3 mm in size (www.micrographia.com).

the undiluted shampoo and left one untreated as a control.

Head lice cannot survive long off a scalp in the best of circumstances, about 24 hours, but after one night there was essentially no difference in the activity of the lice that had been submerged in the insecticidal shampoo and the untreated control louse. I therefore concluded that the population of lice that we were dealing with was, indeed, resistant to the insecticide.

Obviously it would have been good to have more specimens to test, but the supply was limited. That is one of the difficulties of doing research on an obligate human parasite. In the end, the answer to the problem was a lot of nitpicking by my wife (as I said earlier, some things don't change).

Richard J. Hilton
541-772-5165 ext. 227

Senior Faculty Research Assistant /
Entomologist
Oregon State University-Southern
Oregon Research & Extension Center
richardhilton@oregonstate.edu

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