

PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERNS RELATED TO HEAD LOUSE INFESTATIONS IN ISRAEL

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The examination of the skin of head louse infested children revealed that bite reactions, pruritus, excoriations and conjunctivitis were more frequent than in non-infested children. Other clinical manifestations such as secondary infections, lymphadenopathy, eczema and blepharitis were equally common in both groups.

The sequence of the skin reactions on a volunteer to continuous exposure to lice bites was as follows: Phase I, no clinical symptoms; phase II, papules accompanied by pruritus of medium intensity; phase III, wheal formation immediately after the bite, followed by a delayed papular reaction and intense itching; phase IV, papular reaction with diminished reactivity of the skin and mild pruritus. It is possible that the presence of lice is only discovered during phase III, 3-4 weeks after the initial infestation, when the pruritus becomes intense.

The emotional reactions of kindergarten children to head lice infestation, was studied by examining their drawings on lice and lice-related subjects. The choice of color was significant (black was used by 43% of the children, indicating that the subject of lice is associated with anxiety and fear), as were the unhappy faces and omissions of mouths in the drawings. Parents, kindergarten staff, teachers, nurses and social workers are often very distressed when lice are diagnosed, causing the child to feel upset and guilty.

The media alarm periodically the general public by stressing the dangers of organophosphate and carbamate insecticides. This causes people to try to control lice only with the use of louse combs or with "natural" products whose efficacy in clinical trials has yet to be reported. In 1996 the Ministry of Health demanded that companies producing or importing pediculicides prove the efficacy of their products by conducting clinical trial in the country. Since then several products were removed from the market and the number of pediculicides sold decreased from 400,000 to 260,000 per year.

The education of the general public and particularly of parents, teachers, nurses, pharmacists and physicians on the biology and control of head lice is of a paramount importance. This was partially achieved by a large number of interviews to newspapers and radio, screening of three TV programs, a video film for the Jerusalem Municipality and a brochure for the Ministry of Health.