The headlouse is with us and thriving!

The most important aspect in the fight to get rid of headlice is a heightened public awareness and health education. School nurses aim to show a film to the oldest children in nearly all primary schools every term: all parents receive a cordial invitation to attend and discuss any problems. It is unfortunate that only the most motivated of parents do attend. My own feeling is that until this little menace affects your own family one feels safe and secure in the hope that it never will. When it does occur, how do we treat it? There are two effective lotions which are used - Prijoderm and Caryliderm, both of which are also pesticides used in crop spraying. Prijoderm contains Malathion and Caryliderm contains Carbaryl.

Resistance
These lotions are used alternately to try to prevent the louse becoming resistant to them. At the moment, Prijoderm is the lotion of choice. Lice are, however, beginning to acquire resistance to the lotions and we wish to have Caryliderm in reserve for use next year.

The lotions should be used strictly according to the instructions on the bottle, and the whole family must be treated to be effective. I wish to emphasise that both of these preparations have been thoroughly tested and are totally safe.

However, if your child should have any other allergy or you have doubts about using them, your doctor may be able to recommend some other preparation.

On the continent, several other preparations can be bought, but they have not been tested and proven safe in this country. Although they may prove successful, please bear in mind that there may be side-effects as they are all made from pesticides.

Both Prijoderm and Caryliderm claim to give the hair a protective coating against further infection. However, my experience in North Devon has been that this does not last long, for two reasons.

First, our water has a relatively high amount of naturally-occurring chemicals in it, and this weakens the protection of the lotion remaining on the hair. Second, nearly every child in the area now attends the Leisure Centre for swimming lessons, and here chlorine has definitely been added to the pool water, stripping all remaining protection from the hair. Switching to a natural shampoo and using a conditioner, but unless a cap is skull-light water will seep in under it.

Grooming
We therefore come back to wondering what mechanical means we have to help us fight the headlouse. The most important is good grooming. It sounds too easy, but combing the hair right and morning with a very dry comb, scraping it right down to the scalp and all over the head, works wonders. If there are lice they will move, and the chances are that you will damn well get them. Break even of one of the legs on an insect and it cannot survive and breed.

The Victorians were great ones for brushing and combing their hair - one hundred strokes every night. I am sure that headlice were about as rare then. I do not hear of anyone else who has used this method.

We do, however, recommend combing a small amount of baby oil, Vitamin A, or else sleep cream through the hair following treatment, and also at other times when washing the hair. This is helpful as the lice prefer not to have to get a grip on the hair to lay its eggs.

Enthusiasm

Do not be worried by one or two lice. Comb them out vigorously and keep the lice for emergencies only. Weekly use of lotions is not wise, as it only weakens their efficiency when they are needed in a real outbreak of these pestilential creatures. As I mentioned before, school nurses go into primary schools every term to show films and talk about infestation and its prevention. The children themselves respond with great enthusiasm, and I have recently had a great response from them in the form of posters, poems, and even lice mobiles! I end with a poem from among those submitted from Newport Primary School for a competition.

Headlice, headlice, creeping, crawling everywhere - on your head, Headlice, headlice, riding in your hair, laying eggs - everywhere. Headlice, headlice, comb them, wash them OUT. No one likes them - headlice.

Contact: Mrs Marion J. Thorne SNR, School Nursing Sister, The Hollies, Newton Town, Barnstaple, North Devon EX31 3PN.