

Ewww, gross!

Icky childhood infections that really aren't so bad

By Tiffani Hill-Patterson

We've all been there: the dreaded note from school announcing a lice outbreak, your kid yelling at 2 a.m. about itching "down there," the cracking and peeling of your shortstop's feet - all gross and icky.

But most of these childhood infections aren't as bad as they seem. Four local pediatricians give us some insight into common infections.

LICE

Moms freak out most about these tiny parasites that, according to Dr. Jeff Malone of South Trace Pediatrics in Hoover, are the vampires of the pest world. "The critter has to have a daily blood meal to live, so it lives only on people and is only transferred person to person," he says.

Not quite as sexy as Twilight's Edward Cullen or True Blood's Bill Compton, right? Well, they're not as dangerous either. They won't turn you immortal, but they will make you itch like there's no tomorrow.

Dr. Peily Soong of Pediatrics East in Birmingham says lice cause no harm. "It's gross and it's a nuisance, but there are no medical ramifications or long-term effects from lice."

Several over-the-counter chemical shampoo treatments can get rid of lice, and if they don't work, prescription medications are available. But there is a non-chemical way to stop lice, too: Smother them. Mayonnaise might work, or apply Cetaphil lotion at night and wash it out in the morning.

Every doctor I spoke with said having lice does not mean you are dirty. Lice are no respecter of persons, rich or poor, young or old, black or white. "There are no socioeconomic barriers to lice," Soong says, "It can affect anybody, clean hair, dirty hair. All you have to do is come into contact with the parasite."

In fact, to remove the stigma of lice, the American Academy of Pediatrics recently released a statement

calling for schools to end their "no-nit" policy. The AAP says kids with lice should not be excluded from school.

"Once a child has been treated, he or she can go back to school," Soong says. "Treatment kills the bugs but won't get rid of the nits, which are just leftover parts and mostly cosmetic."

PINWORMS

In the "eww, gross" category, these worms found in our intestines win by a mile. Dr. Keith Stansell of Alabama Pediatrics in Birmingham, explains how pinworms make your child's bottom itch.

"Pinworms are spread by poor hand hygiene; the worm eggs will be on children's hands, then they put their hands in their mouths, and swallow the eggs," he says. "The worms will hatch in the intestines, and the females crawl out of the rectum at night, causing an intense allergic reaction, which results in severe rectal itching."

The itching and ensuing loud discomfort are enough to keep your child and the rest of the household up all night.

If your child scratches the area, Stansell explains, he can get eggs underneath his fingernails and transfer them to other surfaces, continuing the cycle of infections.

Treatment is simple: a single dose of Vermox for everyone in the family and another dose a week or two later. It's also a good idea to wash contaminated bedding, towels, and clothing in hot water.

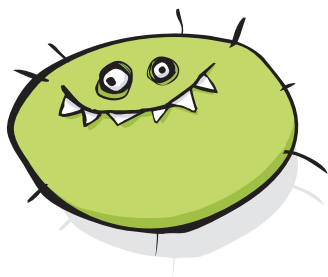
Like all infections, hand-washing is an important preventive measure. And so is keeping your child's fingers out of his mouth.

YEAST INFECTIONS

These infections don't affect only young women, Candida can cause infections in babies, too.

Dr. Max Hale of Birmingham Pediatrics says, "Candida is everywhere and occasionally causes symptom-producing infections on mucous membranes or skin. Babies can have a yeast infection in the diaper area or in the mouth, which is called thrush."

Complications from steroid inhalers can sometimes cause thrush in older children who have asthma. "Yeast infections



are sometimes complications of taking an antibiotic,” Hale adds. “Most are easily treated with a cream or oral antifungal medication.” However, if an infection is hard to treat or returns, see a doctor because it could be a sign of an immune deficiency or diabetes, he says.

TINEA (athlete’s foot, jock itch, ringworm)

Locker rooms are prime spots for tinea infections, which can cause athlete’s foot, jock itch and ringworm and are found mostly in adolescents.

Hale says, “Athlete’s foot is usually acquired by coming in contact with dead skin that is infected with the fungus. Moisture, close-fitting clothes and obesity can predispose children to jock itch.”

In locker room areas, kids should wear flip-flops and dry their feet last. Antifungal creams can be used to treat both athlete’s foot and jock itch.

Though a tinea infection, ringworm is caused by a different strain, Dr. Hale explains. “It’s called ringworm because the rash is usually circular, and it’s often scaly at the border of the ring and is itchy.”

The best way to prevent ringworm is to avoid contact with someone who has it. Like athlete’s foot and jock itch, ringworm can be treated with an antifungal cream.

However, Dr. Hale warns, if it’s on the scalp, treatment with an oral medication for a few weeks will be necessary.

IMPETIGO

You might not hear much about impetigo, which can cause a crusty scab, but it is common.

Malone says, “Impetigo is just an infection of a skin break and is very common across the age spectrum. An insect bite, scrape or an ingrown hair, can provide a skin break.”

Good bacteria, mostly a species of Staphylococcus, live on our skin and rarely cause problems. However, when they find an opening, they can cause painful, red lesions that drain and form a crust.



“A good scrubbing with soap and bandaging with a layer of triple antibiotic ointment is usually all the treatment that’s needed,” Dr. Malone says. “This is good prevention for any skin breaks or bites.” If the spot gets bigger, your child may need to see a doctor.

Dr. Malone explains that most staph is this common variety that routine antibiotics can easily kill. While there are forms of antibiotic-resistant staph that cause skin infections requiring different antibiotics, “too often people assume their child has ‘that awful flesh-eating staph’ that they saw on a medical program on TV. These rarely occur but sell a lot of TV time.”

While these infections are gross, they are part of childhood and treatment is usually simple. Just remember: Good hygiene goes a long way toward preventing them.

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