

An itchy start

Heading off head lice

Bev Gray, RA, CH

photos by Scott Yavis

It's back-to-school time: New books, new clothes, new friends—and lots of new germs and bugs.

School children, especially those between the ages of 3 and 10, are commonly exposed to head lice (*Pediculus humanus capitis*), parasitic insects that live in the hair and scalp of humans.

Essential oils can be helpful in avoiding and preventing the spread of lice, though you must be diligent in applying and using the oils in order for them to work. Pure, authentic essential oils like myrtle, lavender, and tea tree are household staples in the fight against head lice.

Recognizing head lice

Nits, or eggs, are oval and normally yellow to white. They are hard to see and can be found securely attached to the hair shaft. The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs, is wingless, and is greyish-white to

reddish-brown in colour.

Head lice are typically found in the hair above the ears and on the back of the scalp, but with larger infestations the entire scalp and even the eyelashes can be affected.

Contracting lice

Head lice can be transmitted by close contact with an infested person or by sharing hats, coats, hair accessories, or towels. Lying on a bed, couch, pillow, carpet, or stuffed animal that has been contaminated also gives lice an opportunity to find a new host.

Protecting against head lice

Start with the recipe for All Purpose Lice Deterrent Essential Oil Blend, and use it in the accompanying formulations to keep these pesky critters from making a home on your child's head.

All Purpose Lice Deterrent Essential Oil Blend

Blend the following essential oils in a 10 mL brown glass bottle.

- 2 mL myrtle (*Myrtus communis*)
- 1 mL rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)
- 1 mL eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globules*)
- 1 mL lemon (*Citrus limon*)
- 1 mL geranium (*Pelargonium graveolens*)
- 2 mL lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*)
- 2 mL tea tree (*Melaleuca alternifolia*)

Store in a cool place out of the reach of children. 20 drops equals approximately 1 mL.



Lice deterrent spray

Mix 2 mL of the deterrent blend in 120 mL distilled water. Pour into a spray bottle. Shake well before each use. Avoid contact with eyes. Spray on the nape of the neck, behind ears, and the top of the head during lice outbreaks. Repeat throughout the day.



Lice deterrent shampoo and conditioner

Add 10 to 15 drops of the deterrent blend to 120 mL of shampoo or conditioner. Shake well. Avoid contact with eyes.



Natural beeswax

This can kill lice by creating a barrier between the lice and their food supply, the scalp. In a double boiler melt 7 grams (1/4 ounce) of beeswax, and stir in 30 mL of castor oil. Continue to stir and add 5 drops each of tea tree, lavender, and geranium essential oils. When the mixture has cooled, apply small amounts to your fingertips and dab onto the scalp—not on the hair, and cover with a shower cap. Leave on overnight and shampoo out in the morning. If the preparation is difficult to get out, wash hair with non-toxic, grease-cutting dish detergent.



Brush/comb cleaning solution

Fill a cup with boiling water; add 5 to 10 drops of the deterrent blend; stir. Place combs and brushes, bristles down, in the cup. Leave for an hour and rinse.



Anti-lice laundry detergent

To kill lice and nits, machine-wash all clothing and bed linens that the infested person touched during the two days before he or she was diagnosed. Wash clothes and linens in the hot-water cycle adding 5 to 10 drops of the deterrent blend to the laundry soap. Throw these items in the dryer with a cloth to which you've added 5 or 6 drops of the deterrent blend and dry on the hot cycle for at least 20 minutes.

As many as six to 12 million people worldwide get head lice each year, so if you notice your child scratching, take a closer look; and if you discover head lice, reassure your child that anyone can get lice. **a**

Bev Gray, RA, CH, a skilled herbalist, registered aromatherapist, and educator, loves to share her passion for medicinal and aromatic plants. She owns Aroma Borealis Herb Shop in Whitehorse. aromaborealis.com.