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Keep school children safe from disease

By Spc. Todd Goodman

Landstuhl Regional Medical Center Public Affairs Office

Landstuhl, Germany – School is set to begin, and with that comes the chance to learn readin', writin' and 'rithmetic. Children also will have the chance to pick up head lice and foot and mouth disease – not requirements on a college application.

Head lice are a widespread and sometimes unpleasant infection, especially among school-age children. A common misconception is that they are a symptom of poor hair hygiene - lice are just as likely to be found on clean or dirty hair.

Lice can be sneaky devils, lying in wait on a pillow, bed linen or ball cap upward of seven days before finding a head on which to feed, said Cpt. Victoria J. Owens, assistant chief of Landstuhl Regional Medical Center's Community Health Nursing. Once lice attach themselves to a head, it doesn't take long before they lay eggs and take residence.

"An adult louse will lay eggs that will hatch within seven to 10 days," said Owens. "In another two weeks, those lice have reached adulthood and are ready to lay their own eggs. The entire egg cycle only takes three weeks."

Constant scratching and irritation where a rash has developed is a good indication that a person may have head lice.

"Take a close look, especially at the hair toward the nape of the neck," she said. "Eggs can be seen, but an adult is barely visible to the naked eye."

The eggs actually get matted to the hair and scalp.

"I treated a woman who looked like someone had matted her hair with cream of wheat or grits," said Owens.

Contrary to popular belief, head lice cannot jump, hop or fly, but are spread by sustained, direct, head to head contact. Often times, children get head lice from close contact when playing together, whispering, hugging or when in close contact with an infected adult.

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HEAD LICE 2/2/2/2/2/2

To prevent the spread of lice, wash clothes and bed linens in hot water and practice good hygiene. Over-the-counter medications can be used to treat existing lice. After the initial treatments, it is recommended to wait 10 days and treat the area again to kill any remaining eggs.

Hand, foot and mouth disease is a viral infection, which will cycle itself out after seven to 10 days. It is found in saliva and mucous and spreads through the air or by touch. It also is spread through fecal matter, like when a child fails to wash his hands after using the restroom. He touches a toy, then it gets touched by some other child and inevitably, he scratches his eyes or puts his fingers inside his mouth.

Symptoms can include fever, headache, sore throat, lesions on the palm, fingers or soles of the feet, lack of energy and small ulcers in the mouth. The infection usually occurs during the summer and fall and can affect anyone, though it is more common in small children.

“Parents should worry about their child’s hygiene,” said Owens. “Wash your child’s hands often, even if the child is still in diapers. A lot of good hand washing needs to take place.”

When washing a child’s hands, make sure to wash between the fingers and around the nails. There is no cure for this infection and antibiotics do not help. Much like the common cold, sufferers simply must wait for it to run its course.