Oh, no, they're . . . LICE!
Two words parents fear: head lice. They may be coming soon to a child's scalp near you

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GABRIELLE GLASER
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The cycle is predictable enough. Pumpkins decompose on your doorstep. Leaves clog the streets. And then something really scary happens: A note comes home in your kid's backpack -- the school nurse has found lice in the classroom.

Getting rid of the brown, sesame-seed-sized bugs, which infest millions of U.S. children each year, can drive you around the bend. Just thinking about them can make your head itch.

Portland Public Schools have a no-nit policy, and children with active infestations are excluded, Matt Shelby, a spokesman, said. But check with your district; the policy may vary.

Lice are parasites that live on blood they get from human scalps. The infestation of lice, or pediculosis, has plagued humans for millennia: Scientists have found some species clinging to hair shafts of Peruvian mummies.

"Lice themselves rarely, if ever, cause direct harm," said Susan Darnell, nurse consultant in the Multnomah Education Service District. "They are unpleasant and a social annoyance, but not really a public health concern. They are not known to transmit disease from person to person. If we could debunk the social stigma, we'd be ahead. It has nothing to do with someone being dirty."

The head louse adheres to the hair shaft when feeding, mating and laying eggs, and is capable of spreading rapidly. A fertilized female can lay as many as 10 eggs every 24 hours. The tiny, tear-shaped eggs, or nits, attach to hair strands with a stiff glue. They like warm, moist climates -- and sweaty little heads are perfect.

"Everyone and anyone can get head lice," said Deborah Altschuler, who heads a nonprofit organization in Massachusetts called the National Pediculosis Association. "They are persistent."

Increasingly, they also are resistant to over-the-counter insecticidal shampoos, which some studies have found dangerous to humans. Altschuler, among others, calls for parents to remove nits manually with metal nit-picking combs.

Anyone who says they have a magic bullet for lice, Altschuler said, is misguided. "Getting rid of lice takes work and vigilance."

She suggests that parents and schools perform regular head checks. "If you wait, the challenges associated with head lice can seem huge," she said. "But parents who do regular checks will find that the problem is manageable and will save time and worry in the long run." Pesticide warnings

A recent study by INSERM, the national French health institute, found that children who use the pesticide shampoos commonly suggested for head lice treatment are nearly twice as likely to get leukemia. The study did not name brands but called for several chemicals, including malathion, pyrethroid and lindane, to be studied further.

Several leading pesticide shampoo brands in the United States list a form of pyrethroid as an active
ingredient.

French researchers interviewed the parents of 280 children who had been recently diagnosed with acute leukemia, as well as the parents of 288 children who did not. "The observed association with insecticidal shampoo treatment of pediculosis, which has never been investigated before, requires replications." **LouseBuster**

A Utah researcher has abandoned chemical warfare in favor of physical combat.

Dale Clayton, a biologist at the University of Utah, arrived in Salt Lake City from Oxford University as a specialist in bird lice. In arid Utah, however, Clayton noticed that it was more difficult to keep lice alive than it had been in soggier Britain. He then began experimenting with parching the parasites to death.

At first, Clayton put bird lice, which don't attach to human hair, on his own head, strapped on an old-fashioned beauty-parlor dryer and turned on the television for 20 minutes. The lice survived. Then he began experimenting with a blow-dryer, but the lice survived that, too. Meanwhile, his adolescent children got pediculosis, so Clayton began experimenting with head lice.

He devised a kind of small vacuum-cleaner-sized gadget that blows air out. He named it the LouseBuster. The machine lacks the heat of a blow dryer but has twice the power, which comes out of a hose with a toothed nozzle that guides the blowing air. In order for it to work, the operator must lift the hair to expose the roots, where the lice nest and lay their eggs.

In a study of Utah schoolchildren, the machine killed 80 percent of the lice. The remaining lice did not breed, effectively curing the head-lice infestations.

Clayton published results last year in the journal Pediatrics and is working to develop the LouseBuster, which is not yet available commercially. **Lice in history**

Lisa Sarasohn, a professor of early modern European history at Oregon State University, said the uneasy coexistence humans have with lice has a rich history.

"Lice occupied a vivid place in European consciousness as well as their hair," she said.

During long winter evenings, it was customary to pick lice out of a loved one's hair, Sarasohn said. "People in former times may have taken fewer baths than we do, but they certainly did not like to be the food of lice."

For centuries, most homes were usually made of mud and daub, so it was almost impossible to get rid of the bugs. As today, the parasites also showed no regard for socioeconomic status. "Even in the homes of the rich, they proliferated," Sarasohn said. As elegant as they appear, Italian stone floors may, in fact, date to eradication attempts.

And like today, people took desperate measures with their hair. In the 17th and 18th centuries, upper-class men shaved their heads as a preventive measure and replaced the hair with wigs.

"I always tell my students never to use the phrase, 'Throughout history,' " Sarasohn said. "However, when it comes to lice, maybe it applies."

Gabrielle Glaser: 503-221-8271; gabrielleglaser@news.oregonian.com

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