The gadget that blows your head lice away

BY LEWIS SMITH, SCIENCE REPORTER

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PARENTS may soon be spared the painstaking combing of children's hair and the unpleasant stench of head lice lotions after the development of what could be the most effective treatment yet for nits.

A team of American scientists has designed a novel form of hairdryer, which tests suggest could eradicate 80 per cent of lice and 98 per cent of their eggs. The surviving lice were unable to breed.

Dale Clayton, from the University of Utah, has developed a hairdryer that works at a lower temperature but with a faster airflow than a conventional one. It has a nozzle that is held close to the scalp and destroys the parasites by drying them.

Professor Clayton had been researching lice infestation in birds and had discovered that in Utah's dry air it was impossible to keep samples alive unless they were kept in a humidifier. When his children came home with head lice he wondered whether the nits could similarly be dried to death.

Initial experiments with conventional hairdryers proved disappointing, but he eventually devised a machine, nicknamed the LouseBuster, that blows air heated to 60C (140F) and is effective when combined with a special comb. "Head lice have evolved resistance to many of the currently used pediculicides," the team reported in the journal Pediatrics. "Hot air is an effective, safe treatment and one to which lice are unlikely to evolve resistance."

Professor Clayton said that a conventional hairdryer held close to the scalp could burn the skin and that parents should continue to use alternative treatments until his new device came on to the market.