Guidelines for Nuisance Conditions Common to the School Setting

Some conditions seen by the school nurse require response and support but do not pose a health threat. These nuisance conditions often cause concern and anxiety in schools and homes. Head lice, bed bugs, scabies and ringworm are some examples of common nuisance conditions that are seen in the school setting. Parents, school staff and administration may look to the school nurse as the expert when seeking guidance related to best practices. The school nurse, as a student advocate and health expert, should be included in the school district's community planning, implementation, and evaluation of a pest control program for the school setting.

Head Lice

Head lice (*pediculosis capitis*) are small parasitic insects that live on the scalp and neck hairs of their human host, attaching their eggs to the hair shaft. Head lice move by crawling and cannot jump or fly. The presence of head lice is most often detected through the observation of adult lice or nits (eggs) attached to the hair shaft of the host, commonly found at the nape of the neck and behind the ears. Head lice are not known to carry disease and are not considered a health hazard. Pruritus (itching) is the most common symptom of lice infestation. Other symptoms may include:

- a tickling feeling or a sensation of something moving in the hair,
- irritability and sleeplessness, and
- sores on the head caused by scratching, which can sometimes become infected with bacteria normally found on a person's skin (CDC, 2024).

It is not recommended that students be sent home when head lice or nits are discovered. Notifying parents of the affected student(s) at the end of the day and educating them on evidence-based treatments is the best course of action. Although common in the past, "no nit" and "no live lice" school policies should be eliminated and are not supported by professional organizations who view this as contributing to unnecessary absenteeism (NASN, 2025).

Bed Bugs

A bed bug is a small, flat, reddish-brown insect that requires a human host. The insect is wingless and does not jump or fly. They can, however, successfully move on clothing, luggage, boxes and bedding and can live several months without feeding. Identification should be made by a trained professional. Bed bugs are not known to transmit diseases but can cause:

- skin irritation which can lead to scabbing and possible infection,
- allergic reaction, and
- increased stress from skin irritation and lack of sleep.

Finding a bed bug on a student is not grounds for sending them home. In 2025the EPA published *Steps for Success in Dealing with Bed Bugs in Schools*. outlining recommended actions. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has an information page including *Bed Bug Facts* and several other resources. NC State University's Integrated Pest Management for Schools and Child Care Facilities published a sample protocol with recommendations for limiting the spread of bed bugs in schools.

Ringworm

The CDC recognizes several fungal infections that are common to the school-aged population. Among these is the fungal infection tinea. Tinea has different names dependent upon where on the body it is found. Ringworm (tinea on the body) and athlete's foot (tinea on the foot) are two such terms. Ringworm appears as an itchy circular rash. The fungi causing the infection can live on clothing, towels, bedding and other surfaces. Ringworm can transfer easily from pet to human. A child with ringworm on the scalp will require oral medication. Direct contact with the affected areas should be avoided (CDC, 2026, January 6). Parents should be notified when ringworm is suspected. Treatment recommendations are dependent upon the location of the symptoms. Generally, students do not need to be sent home from school but should start treatment before returning (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2026). Local policy may call for exclusion from some sports in which lesion contact may be likely.

Scabies

Scabies is an infestation of the skin by the human itch mite. The mite burrows under the skin to lay its eggs causing severe itching and a pimple-like rash. The mite is spread by prolonged direct skin-to-skin contact. It can take 4-8 weeks from the beginning of infestation for the symptoms of scabies to occur. A child can usually return to school the day after treatment (CDC, 2024, September 9).

Conclusion

It is not recommended that class or school-wide communication highlighting outbreaks of nuisance conditions be sent home as such action may increase anxiety, create embarrassment and social stigma for the affected student(s) and place the student's rights to confidentiality at risk. Students absent from school beyond the recommended time frame for treatment of nuisance conditions are missing valuable education time. School nurses are in a pivotal position to help educate others and dispel myths and stigmas regarding nuisance conditions by providing education on life cycles, methods of transmission, treatment options and care of the environment to the student's family, school and community at large.

References and Resources

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