



31 October 2023

BY EMAIL ONLY

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae

Dáil Éireann

Leinster House

Kildare Street

Dublin 2

Re: 46238/23 - To ask the Minister for Health what measures his Department and the HSE are putting in place due to the increase in outbreaks of head lice, scabies, and bed bugs in people across the country; if he has investigated the reason for the increase in outbreaks; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Healy-Rae

Thank you for your above query. I consulted with colleagues working in HSE Public Health: Health Protection in preparing this response.

Bed bugs

Bed bugs are small, flat parasitic insects called *Cimex lectularius* that live in cracks and crevices in and around beds. They crawl out at night and bite exposed skin to feed on blood. Adult bedbugs are oval-shaped, flat and up to 5mm long – similar to an apple seed. Bed bugs feed on blood. Usually during the night. The bite marks are similar to that of a mosquito or a flea. The bites can cause skin rashes and allergic reactions, as well as extreme irritation, they are not known to carry any infectious diseases. Excessive scratching can sometimes increase the chance of a secondary skin infection.

While traditionally bed bugs have been a problem more frequently seen in developing countries, bed bugs have now been identified in North America and Europe. Recently an upsurge in bed bugs has been reported in Paris.

Bed bugs are usually transported from place to place as people travel. The bed bugs travel in the seams and folds of luggage, overnight bags, folded clothes, bedding, furniture, and anywhere else where they can hide. For Irish residents returning from locations where bedbugs are known to be present the following advice applies: don't bring luggage or clothing into your house without checking it carefully for bedbugs. If further concerned, you can wash clothing on a hot wash (60C) and tumble dry on a hot setting for at least 30 minutes or alternatively put clothing in a plastic bag and put it in the freezer for 3 or 4 days.

Information on bed bugs including clinical signs and symptoms, prevention and treatment, as well as advice for people returning from areas where bed-bugs have been identified, is available to the public at [Bed bugs - Health Protection Surveillance Centre \(hpsc.ie\)](#) Single infestations of bed bugs are not notifiable in Ireland, however, bed bug outbreaks are notifiable. To date in 2023, HPSC has not been notified of any bed bug outbreaks in Ireland.

Scabies

Human scabies is a parasitic infestation caused by *Sarcoptes scabiei*. Tiny mites burrow into the skin and lay eggs, causing intense itching, particularly at night, and a pimple like skin rash. Scabies is contagious and spreads by direct, prolonged, skin-to-skin contact with a person who has scabies. Scabies is spread easily to sexual partners and household members. In adults, scabies is frequently sexually acquired. Scabies can spread rapidly under crowded



conditions where close body and skin contact is frequent. Institutions such as nursing homes, extended-care facilities, congregate settings, and prisons are often sites of scabies outbreaks.

Scabies is one of the commonest skin conditions in the world. Globally, it is estimated to affect more than 200 million people at any time and more than 400 million people cumulatively every year.

Increases in scabies have been reported in several European countries in the past decade. In Ireland scabies is not a notifiable disease, so there is no information available on incidence. Outbreaks of scabies are notifiable. An increase has been seen in the notification of outbreaks of scabies in Ireland in 2023. As of 4th October 2023, 16 scabies outbreaks were notified on the national Computerised Infectious Disease system (CIDR) compared to 9 in 2022 and 4 in 2021. Of these, 6 were in residential institutions (three in direct provision centres, one in a centre for refugees, one in a homeless centre, one in a mental health facility, and two unknown); 5 were in nursing homes and one was in a hospital.

In Ireland, general advice on scabies, clinical history, examination, diagnosis, advise for contacts, infection prevention and control, including management of bedding and clothes, outbreaks and treatment are available on the HSE antibiotic prescribing website at www.antibioticprescribing.ie and Scabies – HSE.ie. This information is kept under review and updated as required. The HSE has recently linked with the Health Products Regulatory Authority regarding availability of medicines for the management of scabies to ensure that there are therapeutic options available to affected individuals. Public health is involved in response when outbreaks occur, and in the management of clusters of cases in vulnerable settings and vulnerable circumstances. The local Community Health Organisation Social inclusion team also offers support in these circumstances. Information, including factsheets in multiple languages is also available on the HPSC website at [Factsheets – Health Protection Surveillance Centre \(hpsc.ie\)](http://Factsheets – Health Protection Surveillance Centre (hpsc.ie)).

Head lice

Head lice and nits are very common in young children, especially during school term when children are in close contact with each other. Outbreaks in school classrooms are not uncommon. Head lice live in both clean and unwashed hair. They are usually spread through head-to-head contact.

Head lice can make your head feel itchy and like something is moving in your hair. The only way to be sure someone has head lice is by finding live lice or eggs. Nits are empty eggs left behind when lice hatch. They are attached to the hair near the scalp. Lice and nits can be difficult to spot in the hair.

There are a number of treatments available for head lice. They should be treated as soon as their identified. Treatments are available at your pharmacy, you do not need to see your GP. Everyone in the home should be checked and treated on the same day if they have head lice. There's no need for children to stay off school if they have head lice.

Single cases and outbreaks of head lice are not notifiable in Ireland and are extremely common. Information and advice on treatment of headlice is available to the public at Head lice and nits - HSE.ie

We trust this answers your query.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Cuddihy".

Dr John Cuddihy

National Director of Public Health

MCRN: 16227

