

Ringworm of the Scalp (Tinea Capitis)

What is tinea capitis? It is an infection of the skin and hair caused by a fungus, not a worm. It can be cured with oral medication. Avoiding contaminated objects and treating infected family members can prevent the infection from coming back. The fungus can be spread either by direct contact with another person or from sharing objects that touch the hair such as combs, brushes, hats, etc. Occasionally, pets can transmit the infection. **Over 30% of family members can carry the fungus without symptoms.**

What does it look like? Are there symptoms? If the infection is on the skin, it sometimes has a ring-shape: pink with a raised, flaky border and a clear center. On the scalp there will often be bald spots that can slowly increase in size. Sometimes there are "black dot" broken hairs in the bald spots. There may be dandruff, itching and swollen lymph glands. Once the infection clears, the hair will grow back within 3-6 months.

How do you treat tinea capitis? Unlike other fungal infections of the skin, fungal infections of the hair requires treatment with a prescription medication taken by mouth. Scalp oils or creams will not work. Griseofulvin is the most common oral medication given for this condition. In order for the medicine to work, it must be taken faithfully, twice a day, for 6 weeks with fatty foods such as milk or french fries. This treatment does not always work. The reasons for treatment failure are, (in order of importance): missing doses; the medication is not taken with fatty foods; continued exposure to other people who carry the fungus or using shared objects that touch the hair.; rarely, the fungus is resistant to griseofulvin.

In order prevent the infection from coming back:

- Do not share combs, brushes, hats, rubber bands, towels, etc.
- All family members must use a medicated scalp treatment every day. For people who shampoo every day, use a medicated shampoo. For those who shampoo less often, use scalp oil that contains salicylic acid (for example: Scalpicin "Original Formula", "3% Scalp Relief", "Keralyt 3% Gel"). Scalp oil is available without a prescription.
- Consider treating pets, especially if their coat is unhealthy.

Is tinea capitis contagious? How do I prevent its spread? Close family and friends are highest risk for catching ringworm. Children with tinea capitis do not need to miss school but must be warned not to share hats and other hair-care products.