

# Beat those back-to-school bugs!

It's September—head lice season! Best friends Penny and Wendy make house calls to get rid of these icky pests

Spotting one of these sesame-seed-sized creepy crawlers in your child's hair can really bug you out. No wonder Nancy Smith\* of Garden City, N.Y., was crying when she picked up the phone to call Wendy Beck. Two days earlier, she'd spotted a small but suspicious-looking bug on her sixth grade daughter's head. It turned out her daughter had picked up head lice from a friend next door. Nancy called her pediatrician, and the nurse told her to buy an over-the-counter kit that came with special shampoo and nit combs. For two days Nancy scrubbed furiously and raked the comb across her daughter's tender scalp, but the bugs and eggs seemed to multiply. The lice spread to her youngest daughter's head, and her husband and son rushed off to the barbershop to get crew cuts. When she felt a bug crawling across her own scalp, Nancy decided to call in the pros.

Her neighbor referred her to the Lice Beaters, a duo based in Long Island, N.Y., that makes house calls. When Wendy and her partner, Penny Good, pulled into the driveway of the Smiths' home that evening, the family of five was waiting just inside the front door.

At the sight of Penny and Wendy wearing their Dr. Seuss scrubs and carrying bags of supplies, one of the daughters shouted, "The lice ladies are here!" The beater babes, as they call themselves, instantly put the anxious Smiths at ease, with

*\*Name changed to protect privacy.*



Meet Wendy (left) and Penny, the "lice ladies."



These stubborn critters like to hang on to clean hair.

## Lice lies

Learn the truth about this common problem from pros Penny and Wendy.

- Don't be embarrassed or ashamed if you or someone in your family has head lice. It doesn't mean you're dirty or contaminated; head lice will infest only the cleanest hair.
- Boiling your sheets, throwing out your mattress, shaving your body hair, and steam-cleaning your carpets do not get rid of head lice. These remedies are old wives' tales.
- Barbie dolls, toys and pets (even those with fur) cannot catch head lice. Lice feed off the blood from the human scalp, so once they're off that part of the head, they start to die.



humorous one-liners like “Lice to meet you!” and “Are you having a lice day?” Not only do Penny and Wendy rid families of head lice, they actually have fun doing it. Since they launched Lice Beaters in 1996, they’ve breezed into thousands of houses like the Smiths’, helping panic-stricken families cope. “By the time people call us,” says Wendy, “they are in a freak-out frenzy.” Adds Penny, “They’ve reached total lice lunacy.”

her bug-beating business idea, Wendy responded, “You must be crazy!” Penny persisted, and Wendy watched as her friend came to the rescue of a handful of desperate mothers. “You know what?” Wendy said, “You *are* crazy, but I’ll do it anyway.” Penny and Wendy—and the Lice Beaters—have been on call ever since.

Wendy, 50, works in her husband’s office (he’s an internist); Penny, 49, now works in a hospital lab, but most evenings and weekends they’re stepping out in their Dr. Seuss or animal-print scrubs. Their stomping ground is Connecticut, New Jersey and parts of New York (including New York City). And though they’ve also gotten calls from desperate parents in England and Italy, the farthest the Lice Beaters have driven is about 100 miles, to upstate New York. Through the years, Penny and Wendy have deloused people of all ages, from an infant to a grandmother.

Once they arrive at someone’s home, they sit their patient down on a folding chair and set up bright lamps. Then Penny and Wendy take command of the patient’s head, checking from back to front and then from front to back, sliding the bugs and nits down individual hair shafts with their fingernails, all the while making jokes and debunking all sorts of lice myths. (See “Lice lies,” page 109.)

Though the house call to the Smiths’ turned out to be relatively easy—Penny and Wendy treated the whole family in an hour and a half—the Lice Beaters have spent as many as two days on an appointment. Yet even during the longer jobs, when their backs and fingers start to ache,

## Don’t be a nitwit

Keep lice from shaking up your life by taking these precautions.

**Know what you’re looking for.** Lice are tiny insects; nits are their eggs. Check out the National Pediculosis Association’s web site ([www.headlice.org](http://www.headlice.org)) or the Lice Beaters’ web site ([www.licebeaters.com](http://www.licebeaters.com)) to view pictures of the enemy so you’ll know it when you see it.

**Detect the pests early.** If your child has an itchy scalp and someone in her class has had a bout of head lice, check her head immediately. The sooner you tackle the lice, the less time they have to lay their eggs (the nits), and the shorter the infestation will last.

**When in doubt, take it out.** Use bright light and magnifying glasses when checking your child’s head. If you see anything that might be a nit or a bug, slide it to the end of the hair, put it on a



damp paper towel and flush it. Even if you think it might be dandruff or a crumb, take it out. Start with the web sites above to find a treatment plan and take action.

**Don’t keep it a secret.** If a child in your family has lice, notify her school and extracurricular groups she’s in immediately. Don’t be ashamed: Lice are only attracted to the cleanest hair.

their upbeat attitudes don’t flag. “It’s either laugh or cry,” says Penny. “So we laugh.” By the time they leave, their clients’ tears and freak-outs are a thing of the past. That’s the most gratifying part of their job: seeing families go from frantic to calm, and accepting the profound thank yous that accompany the checks for their services. Penny and Wendy say they’ll never retire; as long as there are lice, the beater babes will come to the rescue.

By Caroline Tiger

## Beat the bugs

Keep your child’s hair in a braid or bun to prevent infestation—long hair acts as a ladder or jungle gym for lice. Put gel or hair spray in your child’s hair to create an artificially dirty environment that lice won’t be attracted to.



Penny understands the frustration. The idea to launch Lice Beaters came to her when she was fielding calls at her pediatrician husband’s office from moms who weren’t making progress with over-the-counter lice shampoos. She also noticed more articles reporting that head lice were developing a resistance to drugstore remedies. So she did some research and came up with an alternative olive oil treatment. She called Wendy, a friend since they met bus-sing tables at age 15. When Penny confided