

Hole in the Head or Head and Lateral Line Erosion

by Zenin Skomorowski KWAS

Last November I acquired an adult Severum (heros severus) as my first large South American cichlid. In January, I noticed some white patches that eventually became fuzzy on his head, mostly above the eyes. I thought it was some kind of fungus or bacterial infection, so I administered some antibacterial medicine containing a natural plant extract called Melaleuca. I had used this medicine before for damaged fins on other fish and it had worked very well. After a few weeks, the infection was getting worse and some holes were appearing in the skin (no scales on this part of the head). I asked some questions at my local fish store as well as searching on the internet. The result was Head and Lateral Line Erosion, or more commonly known as Hole in the Head.

Hole in the Head disease can affect many of the large South American cichlids, like Discus, Angels, Geophagus, Severum's and especially Oscars. There seems to be several suggested causes of this disease.

One suggestion is that the aquarium may not be grounded properly. In other words, powerheads, or submerged heaters may be leaking some electrical current into the water thereby irritating the sensitive lateral line sensors of the fish. You may not feel it when you put your hand in the water, but there may be enough to disrupt the fish. A grounding probe can be purchased for \$20-30. I did not think that a leaking current was causing my problem since I do not have power heads or submerged heaters in my aquarium.

Another suggestion I found is that activated carbon may be releasing toxins or a fine dust that irritates the head and lateral line sensors. I do not use carbon of any kind in my canister filter.

The next suggestion was poor water quality. Most South American cichlids in nature live in large rivers like the Amazon, Orinoco and various tributaries that move a lot of water. Lots of waste is taken away and replaced by fresh water from the mountains and huge drainage basins everyday. Water changes are very important in the home aquarium, so I do at least 20% every week, sometimes an extra change mid-week. I also check the levels of ammonia, nitrates and nitrites with a test kit regularly to make sure they are near or at zero. I do not think water quality is my problem.

The next suggestion is a vitamin deficiency caused by lack of variety and nutrition in foods or an intestinal parasite that inhibits absorption of the nutrients. Lack of variety is not a problem. I give commercially prepared flake and pellet foods containing vitamins, protein and plant matter. The algae tablets, romaine lettuce and zucchini are eagerly consumed several times a week. This leaves the possibility of a parasite.

The most popular suggested parasite is a protozoa called Hexamita. It can be treated by using a prepared aquarium medicine containing Metronidazole. I just followed the treatment schedule on the package. After about 10 days I noticed that the wounds were healing up, and they were gone in about three weeks.

Some discussion on the internet suggests that Hexamita is not the cause of Hole in the Head, because it is not present in some cases, or it shows up after the holes start to form. In my case, I had eliminated other possible causes. Since treating with Metronidazole seems to have worked, I am happy, and so is Roi, my large Severum.

For some photos and more discussion of the theories, please go to www.worldcichlids.com/diseases/Adamhith.html