



Head Lice Information

Head lice are an important community issue and can affect anyone. Many people associate head lice with unclean people or unclean homes. This is NOT TRUE in the case of head lice. Frequent bathing and shampooing will not prevent lice or eliminate them once they are established. Please understand that absolutely no shame should be associated with having head lice. It is estimated that 6-12 million people in the USA get head lice each year. The first step in treatment is to not panic. This is an annoyance, but it is treatable and is not life threatening. The treatment is a three part process: treatment with a shampoo pesticide, nit removal, and environmental clean-up.

What are Head Lice?

-Head lice are tiny wingless insects that live on the human scalp and are limited to the hair of the head. They are smaller than a sesame seed (about 1/8 of an inch long) and have six legs with claws that they use to grasp the hair or cloth fibers. They take on the color of their background, so they may be whitish, yellow, brown or black. They can be difficult to see because they are so small and can move quickly.

-Head lice are most easily found on or near the scalp, especially at the nape of the neck, behind the ears, or on the crown of the head. They can move quite quickly so diagnosis is often made on the basis of finding nits (louse eggs). These are small, yellowish-white, teardrop shaped eggs that are attached to the hair shaft close to the scalp (generally within ¼ inch). Unlike dandruff, they will not wash or fall off. They are firmly attached to the hair shaft with a cement-like substance.

-During an infestation you may find three different forms of the louse: the egg (nit) on the hair shaft, the baby (nymph), and the adult head louse.

- Head lice cannot survive off of a human host for more than 48 hours. Eggs can survive 7-10 days off of host but cannot hatch below 72 degrees.

-Incubation period from egg to nymph is one week and from nymph to mature adult is 3 weeks. A mature adult female lives about 4 weeks and can lay up to 300 eggs in that period.

Symptoms of infestation

Generally, intense itching of the scalp is the first sign of head lice. Children seen scratching their heads frequently should be examined. Often there may also be red marks on the scalp or marks from scratching, although some children show no signs of having head lice.

How do you Get Lice?

The most common form of transmission is by coming in **direct head-to-head contact** with an infested person. It can also be spread by sharing infested clothes such as hats, combs, hair ribbons or brushes, or by lying on beds, carpets, upholstered furniture, gym mats, pillows, sharing towels or common coat racks that have recently been used by an infested person. Head lice DO NOT jump, fly or hop and cannot be transmitted from or to pets or from swimming pools.

What do I Do?

Follow these three basic principles to remove head lice. If one family member has head lice, be sure to check the entire family.

1. Apply a lice-killing hair product. These are available over-the-counter or by a doctor.
2. Remove the nits.
3. Treat the environment.

-Shampooing... Only treat the hair of people who have head lice or nits. There are a number of medicated shampoos available. Read instructions carefully regarding dosage (long hair vs. short hair) and application (wet or dry hair) to ensure you achieve the highest level of efficacy. Apply the hair product **exactly according to package directions** since each product varies slightly in directions for use. Be aware many products suggest you re-treat in 7-10 days to kill any newly hatched eggs.

-Removing the Nits... This is the most frustrating, but very important part of treatment. Work under a good light (sunlight, a strong lamp, or a magnifying lamp). Take a ½-1" section of hair in your fingers. Using a lice comb (metal is best), place the teeth as close to the scalp as possible and gently pull comb through hair from roots to the ends. Make sure ALL the hair goes through the teeth of the comb. Wipe comb with a clean tissue to remove eggs and nits. Pin back the section of hair and repeat the combing process until all sections of hair have been combed. Put used tissues in a plastic bag and throw out immediately. This is an essential part of therapy, and must be done to ensure that treatment will be successful. It also helps children to feel better about themselves if they are nit free. This process may take several hours so be patient. Distracting your child with a book, TV or video game will help. A CHILD MUST BE NIT FREE BEFORE THEY ARE PERMITTED BACK IN SCHOOL.

-Treating the Environment ... In order to prevent re-infestation, it is important to do the following.

- -Wash all clothing, bedding and towels in hot water (above 130 degrees). Dry items at highest heat for at least 20 minutes. Dry clean clothing that is not washable (coats, hats, scarves etc) OR store all clothing, stuffed animals, comforters etc. that cannot be washed or dry cleaned into a plastic bag: seal for 2 weeks.
- -Disinfect combs, brushes and other hair accessories by soaking in hot, soapy water for 10 minutes.
- -Vacuum rugs, carpet, mattresses, furniture and car seats thoroughly. Throw out vacuum bags immediately after use.
- -The use of insecticidal sprays is not recommended and may be harmful to family members and pets.

**These steps MUST be completed in the same day to prevent re-infestation.
Recheck all family members daily for 2 weeks.**

Reporting Cases

The child with head lice and nits is kept out of school until properly treated for head lice. When you feel your child is nit-free, please bring them to school to be checked by the nurse for re-admittance. We have a no-nit policy-meaning your child cannot come back to school until all nits are gone from the hair. Please do not be embarrassed to notify your child's school so other parents can be alerted to a possible outbreak of head lice. Also notify the parents of your child's recent playmates. Parental cooperation will help to protect all children, including your own.

If you have further questions please do not hesitate to call your school nurse. For persistent or recurrent cases, or if you have medical questions or concerns, please contact your own physician. More information may be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/treatment.html>

Illustration of egg on hair shaft (CDC photo)



Nymph form



Adult Louse



Louse on a cotton swab.

