

Head Lice: Fact Sheet for Parents

Each year approximately 6-12 million school age children (about 1 in every 100) are infested with head lice (pediculosis). It is a community-wide issue, as research has shown that transmission in the school setting is rare. Lice are not a sign of poor hygiene and are not a hazard to one's health. Head lice infest all socioeconomic groups, races, ages and genders. The following helpful information includes an understanding of head lice and how to detect and treat it.

What are head lice?

Head lice are parasites that survive by feeding on small amounts of blood from the human scalp. Lice move by crawling, but they do NOT jump, hop, or fly. Lice move quickly and shy away from light. They do NOT harbor or transmit disease. Lice are generally found on the scalp, often around the ears and at the back of the neck. The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed.

What are nits?

Nits are eggs laid by the female louse. An adult female will lay 6-10 eggs a day, attaching them to the hair shaft close to the scalp. The eggs are tiny, grayish-white oval specks that can be difficult to see. They are "cemented" to the hair and are **not** easily removed, therefore you cannot "catch" nits. Nits hatch in approximately 3-10 days after being laid. In general, nits greater than ¼" from the scalp are likely to already be hatched or are not viable.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice are transmitted by direct head-to-head contact with an infested person's head, such as during close play, sleepovers, cuddling, etc. Less likely modes of transmission include sharing personal items such as brushes, hats, scarves, pillows, clothes, etc. Lice cannot survive more than 48-72 hours off the human head.

What symptoms are possible with head lice infestation?

Often (but not always) head lice will cause itching of the scalp. Red bite marks or sores may also be noticed on the scalp or back of the neck. One may have a tickling feeling like something is moving on their head, or possibly trouble sleeping or irritability.

I found head lice (or nits) on my child. Now what?

If you find live lice or you see nits within ¼" of the scalp, prompt treatment should be initiated. Not all members of the household need to be treated unless lice are found on others or the infested individual has shared a bed with another person.

- The **infested person must be treated adequately**, using 4 oz. of chemical per 6" of hair (meaning long hair may require 2 bottles!), applied **exactly** according to the manufacturer's instructions. Over-the-counter treatments can be used (such as Quit Nits, Fairy Tales, Nix, etc) or you may contact your child's pediatrician for prescription treatment if indicated.
- **Avoid** using hair products such as conditioners, detanglers, or conditioning shampoo for 2 weeks following treatment so as not to deactivate the therapeutic chemicals.
- **Wet comb** hair with a fine-toothed or delousing comb daily to remove any nits
- **Remove/kill any remaining lice in your home/car** by vacuuming all carpets and upholstered surfaces that may have come in contact with the infested person's head in

the 2 days before treatment. Personal items such as combs, brushes, barrettes, etc. can be soaked for 1 hour in Lysol or rubbing alcohol or washed with hot soapy water (130 degrees). Hot wash and dry (at least 20 minutes) all exposed clothing and linens (not forgetting car seat covers, backpacks and jackets). Stuffed animals may be placed in a hot dryer for at least 20 minutes. Non-washable items may be dry cleaned or placed in a tightly sealed plastic bag for 14 days. Keep in mind that it is very unlikely that remaining nits would be able to incubate and hatch away from the human head.

- If an over-the-counter treatment has been used, **retreatment** needs to be done between days 7-10, ideally at **day 9**. A persistent case may require a third treatment (check with your physician).
- Continue to thoroughly **recheck** your child's head to detect re-infestation
- It is **NOT** recommended to use insecticides or fumigation at home or in schools. These chemicals can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.

To help control head lice outbreaks, children can be taught to avoid activities that may spread head lice. Teach children to:

- Avoid head-to-head contact (this may be difficult for young children, as close play is common)
- Do not to share personal items such as combs, brushes, hair ornaments, pillows, hats, scarves, other personal headgear, etc. (Head lice being spread by inanimate objects and personal belongings may occur, but is very uncommon)
- Hang coats separately, placing hats and scarves inside coat sleeves or backpack