

HEAD LICE

PERSONAL HEALTH FACT SHEET

What are Head Lice?

Head lice are small insects, about the size of a sesame seed. They live on the scalp and feed by sucking blood. Head lice may turn colors from white, tan, or grey to red or dark brown when they are filled with blood. After the female louse mates, she lays four or five nits about the size of a knot in thread about 1/4 inch from the scalp. Nits are glued so strongly to the hair shafts that ordinary washing and brushing of the hair will not remove them.

After seven to ten days the nits hatch. New lice mature, mate, and begin the cycle of infestation all over again, if not treated. A single louse can lay as many as 90-120 eggs during its typical 30-day life span. Hundreds of nits may be found on the head of an infested person.

How is it spread?

Head lice is spread by head to head contact; or by sharing personal items such as hats, combs, brushes, ribbons, barrettes, coats, clothing, towels or bedding. Lice can also spread by placing heads on furniture, rugs, or car seats recently used by someone with lice. Theater and airline seats and head phones are sometimes linked to spread of the insect, as are piling coats, hats, and scarves on top of each other. Head lice cannot jump. Head lice cannot live more than 48 hours off the head.

How is it treated?

- Contact your doctor or Health Department to verify the need for treatment if you are unsure.
- Prior to cleaning the environment, all household members should be checked for head lice. Over-the-counter lice treatment products containing permethrin 1% are recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics for head lice in newly diagnosed cases. Follow directions carefully.
- Do **NOT** treat pregnant women, nursing mothers, infants, or children under 2. (Consult with a physician).
- Re-treat according to manufacturers recommendations, usually 7-10 days after initial treatment if newly hatched lice are found. If a second treatment fails, consult with your physician.
- After lice treatment, the nits (eggs) must be removed with a fine tooth nit comb. Comb daily for three weeks until no nits are found.

What else should be done?

- Machine wash in hot water (130°F) all items used two days before lice were discovered, such as: towels, sheets, pillow cases, clothes, cloth toys, etc., or machine dry in hot dryer for at least 30 minutes.
- Head lice and nits can be killed at below freezing temperatures for 24 hours or by sealing articles in plastic bags for 14 days at room temperature.
- Combs and brushes can be cleaned by soaking in boiling hot water for 10 minutes or by soaking in Lysol, rubbing alcohol or lice shampoo for one hour.
- Vacuum daily bare mattresses, couches, chairs, floors, pillows, carpeting, and car upholstery. Do not use pesticide sprays. Maintain these good housekeeping measures until no lice or nits are seen.

SYMPTOMS OF HEAD LICE

- Itching, especially around the ears and back of the neck.
- Head lice do not cause disease, but infection may develop at scratch sites.
- Evidence of live lice or nits found within 1/4 inch of the scalp.

How are head lice prevented?

- Head Lice treatments should **not** be used for prevention.
- Do **not** share personal items—combs, brushes, hats.
- Place hats and scarves in coat pockets when not in use.
- Notify school staff and parents of playmates to be alert for additional cases.
- Keep long hair pulled back into a braid or bun.

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