

Head Lice Myths and Facts

As common as head lice are, there is an abundance of misunderstandings about them. Here are some common myths about head lice and the facts behind the misconceptions.

MYTH: Lice can jump or fly.

FACT: Lice do not have wings. They cannot fly and they cannot jump. Instead, they move by crawling. That is why direct head-to-head contact, such as kids putting their heads together while playing, is the most common way for head lice to spread from one person to another.

MYTH: You are more likely to get head lice if your hair is dirty, you have bad personal hygiene habits or if your home is untidy.

FACT: Getting head lice has absolutely nothing to do with personal hygiene or the cleanliness of a home. And washing your hair normally will not get rid of lice, which cling to hair follicles, nor nits (lice eggs), which are extremely sticky and cling to hair.

MYTH: An itchy head means your child most likely has head lice.

FACT: Itchy scalp is one of the common symptoms of head lice. But there can be other causes of itchy scalp, such as dandruff or dry skin. Moreover, some children who have head lice may not experience itching.

MYTH: You can get head lice from pets (and vice versa).

FACT: Lice cannot be transmitted from pets, and pets cannot get them from people.

MYTH: Head lice carry and transmit diseases.

FACT: The good news is that lice have not been shown to spread disease. That said, they can be extremely bothersome. Children who have head lice can experience intense itching and develop a rash from the bites, and the skin can become infected from scratching. They can feel irritable and have trouble sleeping because they are itchy. And of course, lice can be emotionally upsetting for a child and for her family.

MYTH: Kids are most likely to get head lice in school.

FACT: This is a common misconception, probably stemming from the fact that school-age children are at an increased risk for getting head lice. The fact is, kids tend to get head lice from places and activities where they are more likely to have direct head-to-head contact or share personal items, such as combs, bedding, towels and hair accessories. The most common sources of head lice infestations are, in addition to school, camp, daycare, slumber parties and sports activities, among others.

What to do if your child gets lice? Call and inform the school. Treat the head with lice lotion or shampoo according to the instructions on the product. Know that you may need to repeat treatment with the lotion or shampoo in 7-10 days. Wet hair should be combed with a fine toothed or nit comb every 3-4 days for two weeks. Student should be kept home until they have been treated and there are no live lice present.

Wash contaminated items: bedding, stuffed animals, clothing and hats with hot, soapy water — at least 130 F (54 C) — and dry them at high heat for at least 20 minutes.

Seal unwashable items. Place them in an airtight bag for two weeks.

Vacuum. Give the floor and furniture a good vacuuming.

Wash combs and brushes. Use very hot, soapy water — at least 130 F (54 C) — or soak combs and brushes in rubbing alcohol for an hour.

Prevention is key! Teach your child not to share hats, scarves, coats, hair accessories, combs, brushes, or towels. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Mayo Clinic websites have more great information on lice diagnosis, treatment and prevention.