

# What are Head Lice?

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Human head lice (*Pediculus humanus capitus*) have been associated with humans for thousands of years. Head lice are minute (about the size of a sesame seed), wingless parasitic insects that must live on a person to survive. They survive by piercing the skin to feed on blood and are almost exclusively associated with hair on the neck and scalp.



Lice are flattened dorso-ventrally, or top to bottom, and have six jointed legs with specially adapted claws for holding on to hair. They can move about readily from hair to hair, but are most adept at clinging to prevent dislodgement. Head lice tend to adapt their color to their surroundings and may range in color from red to brown, gray, or black. Red colored head lice have likely recently fed. Because of their small size, flattened bodies, and color, they may be very difficult to see on someone's head.



**This example illustrates head lice feeding on a human scalp. Lice engorge and enlarge on blood and will become a reddish color when recently fed.**



**This example shows a close up high-resolution image of an adult male head louse in its natural environment.**

The head louse feeds by using rasping teeth to penetrate scalp skin at the base of a hair or behind the ears. The louse then inserts its "straw-like" mouthparts into a blood vessel and feeds much like a mosquito. Over time, this feeding activity can be irritating to the skin and leads to the itching/scratching characteristic of the infestation. A louse can ingest several blood meals per day.