

# HEAD LICE INFESTATION (PEDICULOSIS)

## FACT SHEET

### What are head lice?

Head lice are parasitic insects found on the heads of people. As many as 6-12 million people worldwide get head lice each year.

### Who is at risk for head lice?

Anyone who comes into close contact with someone who already has head lice, contaminated clothing, and other belongings, may be at risk for getting head lice. Pre-school and elementary-age children, 3-10, and their families are infested most often. Girls get head lice more often than boys, women more than men. In the United States, African-Americans rarely get head lice.

### What do head lice look like?

- **Nit:** Nits, head lice eggs, are difficult to see and are frequently confused with dandruff. Nits are firmly attached to the hair shaft and take approximately one week to develop.
- **Nymph:** The nit hatches into a nymph. Nymphs, which look like an adult, but smaller, mature into adults about 7 days after hatching. In order to live, the nymph must feed on blood.
- **Adult:** The adult is about the size of a sesame seed, tan to grayish-white, with six legs. Adult lice can live on the head of an individual for up to thirty days. In order to live adult lice need to feed on blood. If the louse does not have a source of food it will die within two days.

### Where are head lice most commonly found?

Head lice are most commonly found on the scalp behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the neck. Head lice hold onto hair with hook-like claws found at the end of each of their six legs. Head lice are rarely found on the body, eyelashes, or eyebrows.

### What are the signs and symptoms of head lice infestation?

- Tickling feeling or something moving in the hair
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites
- Irritability
- Sores on the head caused by scratching, can sometimes become infected.

### **How did my child get head lice?**

- By head to head contact with an already infested person. Contact is common during play at school and at home (slumber parties, sports activities, at camp, on a playground).
- By wearing infested clothing, such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, or hair ribbons.
- By using infested combs, brushes, or towels.
- By lying on a bed, couch, pillow, carpet, or stuffed animal that has recently been in contact with an infested person.

### **How are head lice diagnosed?**

By looking closely through the hair and scalp for nits, nymphs, or adults. Finding a nymph or adult may be difficult; there are usually few of them and they can move quickly from searching fingers. If crawling lice are not seen, finding nits within a ¼ inch of the scalp confirms that a person is infested and should be treated. If you only find nits more than ¼ inch from the scalp, the infestation is probably an old one and does not need to be treated.

### **How can I treat head lice infestation?**

#### **Step 1: Treat the infested person/any infested family members**

Requires using an OTC (over-the-counter) or prescription medication. Follow these treatment steps:

1. Before applying treatment, remove all clothing from the waist up.
2. Apply lice medicine, also called pediculicide, according to label instructions. If your child has extra long hair, you may need to use a second bottle.

**WARNING:** Do not use a creme rinse or combination shampoo/conditioner before using lice medicine. Do not rewash hair for 1-2 days after treatment.

3. Have the infested person put on clean clothing after the treatment.
4. If some live lice are still found 8-12 hours after treatment, but are moving more slowly, do not retreat. Using a metal lice comb, remove dead and remaining live lice out of the hair. The medicine sometimes takes longer to kill the lice.
5. If no dead lice are found 8-12 hours after treatment and lice seem to be as active as before, the medicine may not be working. See your health care provider for a different medication and follow the treatment instructions.
6. A lice comb should be used to remove nits and lice from the hair shaft. Many flea combs made for cats and dogs are also effective. Finer tooth nit combs, available through Wal-Med\* and the National Pediculosis Association \*, may also be helpful.

7. After treatment, check hair every 2-3 days and use a nit comb to remove any nits or lice you see.
8. Retreat in 7-10 days.
9. Check all treated persons for 2-3 weeks after you think that all lice and nits are gone.

### **Step 2: Treat the household**

1. To kill lice and nits, machine-wash all washable clothing and bed linens that the infested person had touched during the 2 days before treatment. Use the hot water cycle (130 F) to wash clothes. Dry the laundry using the hot cycle for at least 20 minutes.
2. Dry clean clothing that is not washable, (coats, hats, scarves, etc.) OR
3. Store all clothing, stuffed animals, comforters, etc., that cannot be washed or dry cleaned into a plastic bag and seal for two weeks.
4. Soak combs and brushes for 1 hour in rubbing alcohol, Lysol\*, or wash with soap and hot (130 F) water.
5. Vacuum the floor and furniture. Do not use fumigant sprays; they can be toxic if inhaled.

### **Step 3: Prevent Reinfestation**

Lice are most commonly spread directly by head-to-head contact and indirectly through sharing of contaminated clothing or belongings. Teach your children to avoid activities that are likely to spread lice.

- Avoid head-to-head contact common during play at school and at home (slumber parties, sports activities, at camp, and on a playground).
- Do not share clothing, such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, hair ribbons, or barrettes.
- Do not share infested combs, brushes, or towels.
- Do not lie on beds, couches, pillows, carpets, or stuffed animals that have recently been in contact with an infested person.

### **When treating head lice:**

1. Do not use extra amounts of the lice medicine unless instructed. Drugs are insecticides and can be dangerous when misused or overused.
2. Do not treat the infested person more than 3 times with the same medication if it does not work. See your health care provider for alternative medications.

*\*Use of trade names is for identification purposes only and does not imply endorsement.*