

**What Are Head Lice?**

Head lice are parasitic insects that feed on human blood. They are found close to the human scalp. **Head lice are not known to spread disease.** Head lice have three forms:



**Nit/Egg-nits** are lice eggs. They are laid by the adult female at the base of the hair shaft nearest the scalp. Nits are firmly attached to the hair shaft and are oval-shaped and very small and hard to see. Nits are often confused with

dandruff, scabs, or hair spray droplets. Nits usually take about 8–9 days to hatch. Eggs that are likely to hatch are usually located no more than ¼ inch from the base of the hair shaft. Nits located further than ¼ inch from the base of the hair shaft may very well be already hatched, non-viable nits, or empty nits or casings.



**Nymph-** A nymph is an immature louse that hatches from the nit. A nymph looks like an adult head louse, but is smaller. To live, a nymph must feed on blood. Nymphs mature into adults about 9–12 days after hatching from the nit.



**Adult**—a fully grown and developed adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs and is tan to grayish-white in color. An adult louse can live about 30 days on a person’s head, but will die within one or two days if it falls. Adult female head lice are usually larger than males and can lay about six eggs each day.

**How does someone get head lice?**

Head lice move by crawling; they cannot hop or fly. Head lice are spread by direct contact with the hair of an infested person. Anyone who comes in head-to-head contact with someone who already has head lice is at greatest risk. Spread by contact with clothing (such as hats, scarves, coats) or other personal items (such as combs, brushes, or towels) is uncommon. Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with getting head lice.

**Treatment**

Treatment for head lice is needed for an active infestation. All household members and other close contacts should be checked.

An over-the-counter or prescription medicine will need to be applied to the hair and scalp. If you aren’t sure which medicine to use or how to use a particular medicine, always ask your physician, pharmacist, or other health care provider. When using a medicine, always carefully follow the instructions contained in the package or written on the label.

- Have the infested person put on clean clothing after treatment.
- If a few live lice are still found 8–12 hours after treatment, but are moving more slowly than before, the medicine is working. The medicine may take longer to kill all the lice. Comb dead and any remaining live lice out of the hair using a fine-toothed nit comb.
- If, after 8–12 hours of treatment, no dead lice are found and lice seem as active as before, the medicine may not be working. Speak with a healthcare provider, a different medication may be necessary.
- Nit (head lice egg) combs, often found in lice medicine packages, should be used to comb nits and lice from the hair shaft. Many flea combs made for cats and dogs are also effective. Checking the hair and combing with a nit comb to remove nits and lice every 2–3 days may decrease the chance of self-reinfestation. Continue to check for 2–3 weeks to be sure all lice and nits are gone.
- Retreatment is meant to kill any surviving hatched lice before they produce new eggs. For some drugs, retreatment is recommended routinely about a week after the first treatment (7–9 days, depending on the drug) and for others only if crawling lice are seen during this period.

**Supplemental Measures:** Machine wash and dry clothing, bed linens and other items the infested person wore or used during the two days prior to treatment on the hottest setting possible. Clothing and items that are not washable can be dry cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag and stored for two weeks.

Soak combs and brushes in hot water (130°F) for 5-10 minutes. Vacuum the floor and furniture, particularly where the infested person sat or lay.

For Further Information, please contact a Public Health Nurse, Your Healthcare Provider, or the Lewistown Public School District Nurse at (406) 366-0560.