

GENERAL INFORMATION

What are head lice?

Also called *Pediculus humanus capitis* (peh-DICK-you-lus HUE-man-us CAP-ih-TUS), head lice are parasitic insects found on the heads of people. One insect is called a *louse*; more than one louse are called *lice*.

Having head lice is very common. However, there are no reliable data on how many people get head lice in the United States each year.

Head lice are not a health issue but rather a social issue due to misinformation and the negative stigma associated with them.

Who is at risk for getting head lice?

Preschool and elementary school children, ages 3-11, 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. Personal hygiene or household or school cleanliness are not factors for infestation. In fact, head lice often infest people with good hygiene and grooming habits.

How do head lice spread?

Adult lice move by crawling; they do not jump or fly. From the American Academy of Pediatrics, *Pediatrics*, Head Lice, 2010: "Transmission in most cases occurs by direct contact with the head of an infested individual. Indirect spread through contact with personal belongings of an infested individual (combs, brushes, hats) is much less likely but may occur rarely. Lice found on combs are likely to be injured or dead, and a healthy louse is not likely to leave a healthy head unless there is a heavy infestation."

Head lice hold on to hair with hook-like claws found at the end of each of their six legs. It is highly unlikely they will attach to items other than hair because their claws are not designed to do so and because they need a steady food source to survive.

What do head lice look like?

There are three forms of lice: the nit, the nymph, and the adult.

Nit: Nits are head lice eggs. They are hard to see and are often confused for dandruff or hair spray droplets. Nits are found firmly attached to the hair shaft and are usually yellowish or white in color but often take on the pigment of darker colored hair. Nits located more than a ¼ inch from the scalp are usually non-viable (dead) or have already hatched. Nits take about 1 week to hatch but have been reported to hatch in 5-12 days, depending on the room temperature. To hatch, nits require a fairly constant temperature similar to that of the scalp.

Nymph: The nit hatches into a baby louse called a nymph. It looks like an adult head louse, but is smaller. Nymphs mature into adults about 7 days after hatching. To live, the nymph must feed on blood every few hours.



Adult: The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs, and is tan to greyish-white. In persons with dark hair, the adult louse will look darker. Females lay nits; they are usually larger than males. Adult lice can live up to 30 days on a person's head. To live, adult lice need to feed on blood. If the louse falls off a person, it dies within 1-2 days.

Where are head lice most commonly found?

They are commonly found on the scalp behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the neck, although they can be found anywhere on the head. Head lice are rarely found on the body, eyelashes, or eyebrows.

What are the signs and symptoms of head lice infestation?

- Tickling; feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites.
- Irritability in young children.
- Sleeplessness because lice are most active at night.
- Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected.

How did my child get head lice?

- The most common way to contract lice is by close 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 lying on a bed, couch, pillow, carpet, or stuffed animal that has recently been in contact with an infested person.
- Rarely are lice transferred through infested clothing (such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, or hair ribbons) or by using infested combs, brushes, or towels but it is possible.

How are head lice infestations diagnosed?

If crawling lice are not seen, finding nits attached firmly within ¼ inch of the base of hair shafts suggests, but does not confirm, the person is infested. Nits frequently are seen on hair behind the ears and near the back of the neck. Nits that are attached more than ¼ inch from the base of the hair shaft are almost always non-viable (hatched or dead). Head lice and nits can be visible with the naked eye, although use of a magnifying lens may be necessary to find crawling lice or to identify a developing nymph inside a viable nit. Nits are often confused with other particles found in hair such as dandruff, hair spray droplets, and dirt particles.

If no nymphs or adults are seen, and the only nits found are more than ¼ inch from the scalp, then the infestation is probably old and no longer active -- and does not need to be treated.