

Head Lice

What are head lice?

The head louse is an insect that can infest people. These tiny insects (about 1/8" long) make their home in human hair and feed on blood. Head lice multiply rapidly, laying small greyish-colored, oval-shaped eggs (called nits) which they glue to the base of the hair, close to the scalp. Head lice are not known to spread disease.

Who can get head lice?

Anyone can get head lice. They are not a sign of being dirty. Most people don't know they are infested until they see the nits or lice. They are found throughout the world – most commonly on children.

How does a head lice infestation occur?

Head lice have no wings and do not fly or jump, but they can crawl or run through hair quickly. Most commonly, head lice are spread by direct head-to-head contact with an infested person. They may also be spread by sharing personal items such as combs, brushes, other hair-care items, towels, pillows, hats, and other head coverings. Dogs, cats, and other pets do not spread head lice.

What are the signs of a head lice infestation?

Look closely for nits along the hairline at the back of the head and neck and behind the ears. Nits should not be confused with an accumulation of hair spray, hair gels, or

dandruff, which can be easily flicked off the hair; nits cannot because they are firmly attached to individual hairs.

One telltale sign of head lice is a persistent itching of the scalp which is sometimes accompanied by infected scratch marks or what appears to be a rash.

If you have questions about the diagnosis of head lice, call your doctor.

How do you treat head lice?

The recommended treatment includes using either an over-the-counter (OTC) or prescription medicated (lice-killing) product. Effective head lice treatments include products such as:

- "Nix," a cream rinse product available OTC which contains permethrin, a synthetic insecticide
- Many brands of pyrethrin-based shampoo products ("Rid," "R&C," "Triple-X," etc.) which are also available OTC
- "Ovide," a prescription drug containing Malathion.

With all of these products, the lice are often killed with one treatment; however a second treatment seven to 10 days later is often necessary to ensure all of the nits are killed. Because of increasing numbers of reports of treatment failure with the OTC products, make sure instructions on the product label are being carefully followed and talk to your health care provider if lice persist. Additional prescription alternatives are available.

What are some examples of alternative treatments?

Many alternatives to OTC or prescription head lice control products have been suggested. Although there is little scientific information to support these methods, successful treatment has been reported using several alternative treatments when conventional treatments haven't worked, or when there is a concern about the toxicity of using head lice control products repeatedly. The Minnesota Department of Health cannot recommend these treatments without further evidence of their effectiveness. However, we feel it is important to mention some of the more commonly used methods.

The alternative treatments listed below are referred to as suffocants. When applied, the treatment may suffocate and/or create a habitat unfavorable to the head lice.

- Petroleum jelly (Vaseline®)
- Mayonnaise
- Oil (e.g. vegetable, olive, or mineral)

How should you clean up the environment?

Head lice cannot survive off the human body for more than two days. They do not reproduce off the body. They do not live on pets. Any nits that fall off the head will not hatch or reattach. While most head lice control should focus on treating infested people, some simple things can be done in the environment:

- Wash bedding in hot water (above 130° F) and dry in a hot dryer. Wash and dry recently worn clothing (including coats, caps, and scarves) in hot temperatures.
- Clean combs, brushes and similar items by heating in water of at least 130° F for 10 minutes.
- Clean floors, carpeting, and furniture by thorough vacuuming

only. The use of insecticide sprays is not recommended.

Cleaning efforts should happen on the day of the first lice treatment and whenever live lice are found on the patient's head. Focus on cleaning areas and items in which the infested person had contact 48 hours before treatment.

How do you prevent a head lice infestation?

Parents are encouraged to check their children's heads for lice on a regular basis throughout the year. Families should not depend on someone else to check a child's head – this may delay treatment. Remember, if one person in a family, camp, or school has head lice, there's a chance others will too. Check everyone, and use the same treatment if necessary. Treating people without lice or nits is not recommended.

How should schools control head lice?

Schools should encourage parents to check their children regularly for lice at home. Wide-spread head lice screening efforts by schools have not been shown to be effective.

When a case of head lice is suspected, parents should be advised at the end of the day to check their children for lice and treat them if an infestation is found. Children with head lice infestations do not need to be dismissed from school.

Minnesota Department of Health
 Infectious Disease Epidemiology, Prevention, and Control
 St. Paul, MN 55164
 651-201-5414

*To obtain this information
 in a different format, call:
 651-201-5414*

Your child may have been exposed to:

Head Lice

Anyone can get head lice. Head lice are very small brownish-colored insects that live on the head. They are less than 1/8" long, about this size [-]. They lay eggs (nits) close to the scalp. The eggs are tiny (size of the eye of a small needle) and gray or white in color.

If you think your child has head lice, tell your childcare provider or call the school.

Treat your child for head lice and check child's head and remove nits daily. **It takes at least 2 weeks to get rid of lice.**

If all nits within ¼ inch of the scalp are not removed, some may hatch and your child will be infested again.

Check everyone in the house for head lice. Treat only household members with head lice, and treat them all at once.

Does my child need to stay home from childcare and school? No, but it is recommended that your child be treated for head lice. Your child should be encouraged to avoid head-to-head contact with other children.

For more information, call Hennepin County HSPHD-Epidemiology at 612-543-5230 or call your local health department.

Symptoms

Itching of the head and neck. Look for: 1) crawling lice in the hair, usually there aren't very many; 2) eggs (nits) glued to the hair, often found behind the ears and at the back of the neck; and 3) scratch marks on the head or back of the neck at the hairline.

If your child is infested with lice it will take 7 to 10 days from when the eggs are laid until they hatch.

Spread

- By head-to-head contact.
- By sharing personal items that come in contact with the head (combs, brushes, hats, etc.).

Lice do not jump or fly; they crawl and can fall off the head. Head lice do not live longer than 48 hours off the head and only lay their eggs while on the head. The eggs do not hatch if they fall off the head. Lice do not spread to or from pets.

Contagious period

Until treated with a lice killing product.

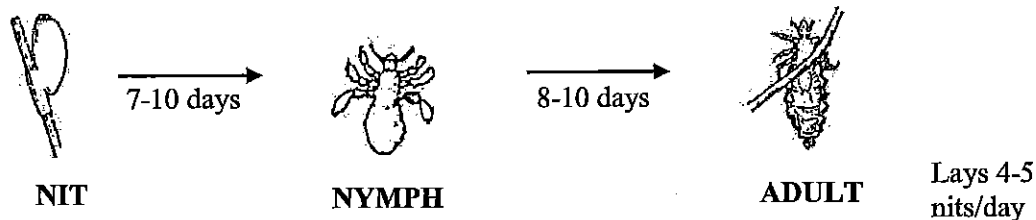
Call your health care provider

- Call your health care provider or pharmacy for advice about treatment. Recommended treatment includes using either a store-bought or prescription lice killing product.
- Follow the product directions carefully. With certain products a second treatment is recommended 7 to 10 days later. Lice treatment products are not 100% effective in killing lice, especially the eggs (nits).
- Removing the nits (nitpicking) is an important part of the treatment for controlling head lice. The nits are glued onto the hair shaft as they are laid, and require effort to remove. See the next page for nitpicking instructions. **Continue checking the head and combing hair daily for 2 weeks.** If all nits within ¼ inch of the scalp are not removed, some may hatch and your child will get head lice again. Nits beyond ¼ inch are likely hatched or dead.

Prevention

- Encourage your child to avoid head-to-head contact with others.
- Check your child's head every month. If one person in the home has head lice, others should be checked too.
- Never share hair grooming items or hair accessories (barrettes, combs, brushes, etc.). Clean all hair items by soaking in a lice treatment product for 10 minutes or cleaning with hot, soapy, or boiling water for 5 minutes.
- Never share towels, bedding, clothing, hats, and headgear.
- Vacuum carpets, upholstered furniture, mattresses, and seats in the car(s) thoroughly. **Insecticide sprays are not recommended** because this will expose household members to unnecessary pesticides.
- Wash clothing worn in the last 3 days (e.g., jackets, hats, scarves, pajamas), bedding, and towels in hot water and dry in a hot dryer for at least 20 minutes before using again. Clothing, stuffed toys, linens, or backpacks that cannot be washed or dried can be dry cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag for 2 weeks.

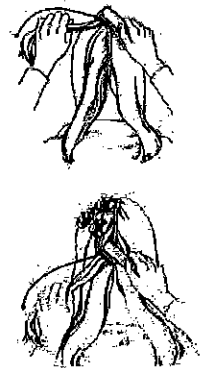
HEAD LICE LIFE CYCLE



How to Remove Nits

Work in a well lit room or under a bright lamp (using a magnifying glass may help you see the nits)

- Divide the hair into 4 parts and divide each part into 1-inch sections.
- Starting at the scalp, use a metal nit comb, cat flea comb, or your fingernails to comb each hair section individually.
- Use the comb or your fingernail to slide eggs off the hair shaft or use scissors to cut hair shafts that have nits glued to them.
- Remove all nits within 1/4 inch from the scalp each time you comb the hair.
- **REMEMBER:** It can take at least 2 weeks to get rid of lice.



More information about head lice can be found on the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) website. Go to www.health.state.mn.us. In the search box type: head lice.