



What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny insects that live in human hair as parasites. They are not able to live longer than 24-48 hours without a human blood source. They are most common in the US among children 3-12 years of age. They are most easily transmitted by direct head to head contact, much less likely by the sharing of personal items. They do not fly or jump. If they fall from a host to another surface, which is not very likely, they can live a very short time in carpet, bedding, clothing or upholstered furniture.

Head lice are small, move fast and are not easily seen. Identification of head lice is most often by recognizing lice nits, or eggs which are deposited by the louse onto the hair shaft, usually in the warm area at the nape of the neck and behind the ears. The eggs, or nits are attached to the hair shaft about ¼" from the scalp. Nits do not fall off the hair shaft like dandruff. Nits must be removed by pulling them off the hair shaft all the way to the end. An active head lice infestation is likely to have been active for at least a month prior to discovery. Schools are not a common source for transmission of head lice, but are often where head lice are identified. Studies demonstrate that screening for head lice in schools does not decrease the incidence of head lice and is not cost effective.

Head lice do not pose a public health threat and are not reportable; they do not spread any disease agents. Lice are not caused by poor hygiene or parental neglect. Head lice are annoying to the child and family, but the greatest danger is a secondary infection from scratching the scalp with dirty fingernails.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

1. Itching or tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
2. Presence of adult lice, which are tan to grayish white, 2-3 millimeters long.
3. Presence of nits, or eggs on the hair shaft ¼" from the scalp, usually found at the nape of the neck and behind the ears.
4. Sores on the head caused by scratching.

Observing a child persistently scratching their scalp would be a good indicator of head lice and reason to check his/her scalp.

How are head lice transmitted?

Head lice are transmitted through close personal contact with another individual who is infested, where they are sharing close sleeping space and/or may have **head to head** contact. Sometimes, but much less often, they are transmitted by sharing personal items such as combs, brushes, hair ties, hats, and clothing. Other possible sources include infested upholstered furniture, cars, bedding, stuffed animals, movie theater seats, but remember head lice survive away from a human blood source only 24-48 hours. Pets and other animals are not a source of head lice. Head lice prefer a clean healthy scalp. The presence of head lice does not indicate lack of hygiene or cleanliness.

How to check for head lice

When checking a student for head lice, you may see several forms:¹

Nits (eggs)

- Teardrop-shaped
- Attached to the hair shaft
- Yellowish or white
- Can be confused with dandruff, but cannot be brushed off

Nymph (baby louse)

- Grows to adult size in one to two weeks
- Found on the scalp or in the hair

Adult louse

- Size of a sesame seed
- Tan to grayish-white
- Commonly behind the ears and near the neckline

How are head lice treated?

Medicated shampoos (Pediculocides) are available by prescription from a physician or directly from a pharmacy. Common over the counter shampoos include Rid and Nix, which are the most standard products used, but there are other varieties you may encounter. Prescription shampoo examples are Kwell and Ovide. If your child is sensitive to ragweed (has hay fever), or has a neurological problem, check with your physician before buying these products.

1. Shampoo should be applied according to directions on the label.
2. All family members with active head lice should be treated except for infants less than 1 year of age. Check with your doctor before treating infants.
3. Use a fine tooth comb to remove nits from the hair shaft.
4. Wash bedding and clothing worn by infected family members in hot water. Dry in hot heat. Wash hair accessories, such as brushes, combs, hats, scarves, etc. Remember lice do not survive after 24-48 hours without a blood supply. If you need to bag items do so for several days.
5. Carpets, upholstered furniture and car seats should be vacuumed.
6. Continue checking family member's hair and combing for nit removal for 7-10 days. You should **repeat treatment in 7-10 days**, or according to package instructions.
7. All school age children should continue to attend school throughout the treatment process.
8. For more information about the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of head lice, visit www.woodstockschools.org/health.