

Head lice (pediculosis)



Children'sSM
Healthcare of Atlanta

Patient and Family Education

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.

What are head lice?

Lice are small, wingless, gray insects about the size of a sesame seed. Lice lay tiny white eggs called nits that may also be seen in the hair. Head lice only live on humans. Anyone can get them, even with good health habits and hair washing. Head lice can be spread from one person to another by direct contact or by sharing personal items (like a hairbrush). They do not cause serious illness or carry any disease.

What are the possible symptoms?

Your child may not have any symptoms, or he may have one or more of these symptoms:

- Tiny gray bugs in the hair
- Nits (eggs) attached to the hair
- Itchy scalp (Itching of the scalp may last longer, even once lice are gone.)
- Scalp rash

What is the treatment?

Some general treatment guidelines to follow at home include:

- You do not need to shave your child's hair. **NEVER** use kerosene, matches or other harmful products to kill lice.
- For preschool-age children, check with your child's doctor about what to use. Some lice treatments can be harmful to young children. Check the label for age limits.

Shampoo and rinse treatment

- Inspect your child's scalp and hair well for lice and nits. Check the hair in a room that has good light, and use a magnifying glass, if needed.
- Shampoo, rinse and towel dry your child's hair. Do not use cream rinse or oils.
- Then, shampoo or rinse your child's hair with a special anti-lice shampoo or hair rinse. A hair rinse that contains permethrin, called Nix, usually works well. Follow the directions on the label or your doctor's advice for using it.
 - Wash your child's hair over a sink. This will help decrease the chance of pesticides (chemicals that kill insects) getting on the rest of your child's body.
 - Do not use regular shampoo, creams or oils on the hair for 2 to 3 days. They may interfere with the action of the anti-lice shampoo or rinse. Repeat the treatment with the shampoo or rinse in 6 to 10 days, if needed.
 - Protect your child's eyes. **DO NOT use the anti-lice shampoo or rinse near the eyes or on the eyelashes.**
 - Inspect the hair and scalp of other people living in the same house as the child. If lice or nits are seen, they should also be treated.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Head lice, continued

Wet combing treatment

- Shampoo, rinse and towel dry your child's hair.
- Comb through your child's hair with a metal fine-tooth comb, such as the LiceMeister. Plastic nit combs do not work well.
- The comb works best with wet hair.
- Hair conditioner, olive oil or vinegar may help the comb go through the hair more easily.
- Repeat the combing every day for 3 to 4 days, as needed, until no live lice or nits are found.

When happens if my child goes to childcare or school?

Check with your child's childcare center or school about their policy for lice. Most often, they do not screen all children for lice. Head lice can be spread from one person to another by direct contact or by sharing personal items (like a hairbrush), so children with live lice pose little to no risk to others.

If the childcare center or school sees that your child has live lice:

- Your child will likely be allowed to stay there until the end of the day.
- A childcare or school staff member will call you (or other caregivers listed as contacts for your child) to let you know that your child has live lice and will need treatment at home right away.

In general, your child may return to childcare or school after:

- One shampoo treatment if all live lice are gone.
- All live lice are removed by wet combing.

Nits alone are not a reason to keep your child home, as nits are not contagious. This means they do not spread to others.

How do I help prevent my child from getting head lice again?

Clean any lice or nits from your home and your child's things:

- Vacuum carpets and upholstery in your home and car. Place the vacuum bag in a plastic bag, and throw it away.
- Soak combs and brushes for 1 hour in the lice shampoo.
- Wash all of your child's bed linens and any clothes he has worn in hot water, and dry on high heat.
- Dry clean items that cannot be washed, such as coats, stuffed toys and sleeping bags. Or, you may place items in a sealed plastic bag for 2 weeks.
- Teach your child not to share items, such as combs, brushes, coats, scarves, hats, towels, hair ribbons and barrettes.
- Check everyone who lives in your home for lice and nits – both adults and children.

When should I call the doctor?

Call your child's doctor if:

- Itching prevents sleep.
- The scalp rash clears but then returns.
- The scalp rash lasts more than 1 week.
- Living lice or eggs appear in the hair after adequate treatment is done as listed above.
- If sores or bleeding occur.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Head lice, continued

- You see signs of infection in the scalp or on the skin, such as:
 - Increased swelling
 - Increased redness
 - Increased pain
 - Drainage
 - Bad smell from sores
 - Fever (temperature over 100.3°F or 38°C)
- You have any questions or concerns about how your child looks or feels.

If lice return, check other family members and items in your home for lice, and call the doctor.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.