Lice Lessons

Facing Head Lice

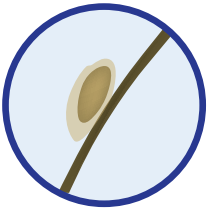
A Guide for Families

What Are Head Lice?

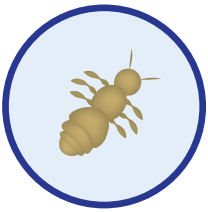
Head lice are one of the most common conditions among school-age children.

Lice feed on human blood and live close to the scalp.

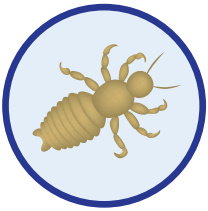
Head lice aren't dangerous, but they are a nuisance.[1]



Nit



Nymph



Fully Grown Louse

What Do Head Lice Look Like?

You may see different stages of head lice when checking your child: eggs and empty egg shells (nits), baby lice (nymphs), and adult lice. Female lice lay nits on hair shafts. Nits are tiny, teardrop shaped, and appear yellowish-white in color. They're often found around the ears or the nape of the neck and can look like dandruff. Adult lice have 6 legs, are tan to grayish-white, and are about the size of a sesame seed.[1]

How Did My Child Get Head Lice?

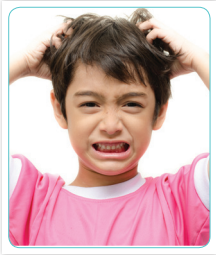
Head lice mostly spread by direct head-to-head contact – during play time, slumber parties, sports activities, camp, or other activities.[2] They cannot jump or fly and move only by crawling. Lice only survive 1 to 2 days off the human body. It's possible but uncommon to get head lice by using another person's comb, brush, hat, scarf, bandana, hair band, or other item used on the hair or head. Pets do not become infested with head lice and do not spread them. If you spot even a single louse, your child has an infestation and needs to be treated.[1]

My Child Has Head Lice. Now What?

If head lice are found on your child's hair or scalp, talk with your school nurse, pediatrician, or family physician to get appropriate care.[1] Other things to consider when selecting treatment:

- Several treatments are available, including prescription options.
- There's no scientific evidence that home remedies work.[3]

- Resistance to some head lice products has been reported, but the actual prevalence of resistance is not known and can vary in different parts of the US.[3,4]
- Follow treatment instructions. Don't use extra amounts or multiple applications, unless your doctor tells you to do so.[5]
- Check all household members. Treat everyone who seems to have an infestation at the same time.[5]
- Call parents of children who've been in close contact with yours, and cancel slumber parties and play dates until your child is louse-free.[1]
- Don't use pest sprays or fogs in the house. They're not needed, and can be harmful if inhaled or get on the skin.[3]



Head Lice Myths & Facts

Myth: Only dirty people get head lice.

Fact: Personal hygiene and household and school cleanliness aren't factors for infestation. Getting head lice is not related to cleanliness of the person or environment.[1,2]

Myth: Head lice carry diseases.

Fact: Head lice don't transmit diseases. Head lice may cause itching and a lack of sleep in people who are allergic to head louse bites (lice are more active in the

dark), but not everyone experiences symptoms. For those who do experience itching, this can lead to excessive scratching. This scratching may increase the chances of a secondary skin infection.[1,2]

Myth: Head lice can jump or fly and live anywhere.

Fact: Head lice cannot jump or fly; they only move by crawling. It's unlikely to find lice living on objects like helmets or hats, because their feet are specifically designed to grasp onto human hair.[1,2] To make sure that items recently in contact with an infected person are louse-free, wash bed linens and recently used clothes, hats, and towels in very hot water, and sanitize or throw away brushes, combs, and hair clips.[5]

Myth: Home remedies can get rid of head lice.

Fact: There's no scientific evidence that home remedies such as applying kerosene, mayonnaise, olive oil, or petroleum jelly are effective head lice treatments.[3,6] Chlorine does not kill head lice, and they aren't affected by being underwater (head lice can hold their breath for several hours).[1] Talk with your healthcare provider about evidence-based treatment options that are currently available.

Fast Facts

- It's important to talk to your school nurse, pediatrician, or family physician to learn about treatment options, including over-the-counter and prescription products
- An estimated 6 to 12 million infestations occur each year among US children 3 to 11 years old[1]
- Getting head lice is not related to cleanliness of the person or environment[1,2]
- Head lice move by crawling; they cannot jump or fly[1]
- Head lice do not carry disease, but they do spread easily[1]

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Frequently asked questions. http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/gen_info/faqs.html. Accessed May 20, 2016. **2.** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Epidemiology and risk factors. http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/epi.html. Accessed May 20, 2016. **3.** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Treatment frequently asked questions. http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/gen_info/faqs_treat.html. Accessed May 20, 2016. **4.** Gellatly KJ, Krim S, Palenchar DJ, et al. Expansion of the knockdown resistance frequency map for human head lice (phthiraptera: pediculidae) in the United States using quantitative sequencing [published online ahead of print March 31, 2016]. *J Med Entomol*. **5.** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Treatment. http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/treatment.html. Accessed May 20, 2016. **6.** Mazurek CM, Lee NP. How to manage head lice. *West J Med*. 2000;172(5):342-345.

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