

A Guide to Head Lice



What are head lice?

Parasitic insects that live on people's scalps and feed on their blood

- Lice glue their eggs (known as "nits") to hair
- Nits take 6-9 days to hatch, and nymphs (baby lice) take about 7 days to mature into adult lice
- Lice can live on a person's head for about 30 days
- Female adult lice can lay ~6 eggs a day

What symptoms do they cause?

Itching, tickling, or sores on scalp

What do they look like?

- Nits are usually oval and white to yellowish-brown in color ($\frac{1}{2}$ the size of a pinhead)
- Nymphs (baby lice) are about the size of a pinhead
- Adult lice are about the size of a sesame seed and tan to grayish white in color

See picture below comparing the size of a nit, nymph, and adult head lice to a penny



How do lice spread?

- Typically through **direct** head to head contact
- **Indirect** contact is a less common source of spread
 - Through clothing or items that have been in contact with someone with a lice infestation (hats, scarves, coats, hair clips, combs, hair brushes, pillows, carpet, beds, or stuffed animals)
- Animals do not get or spread head lice

How to check for head lice: Please see attached form “How to Examine for Head Lice”

<https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/resources/pdf/HeadLiceFlyer.pdf>

- The best way to diagnose an infestation is by finding a live louse on the scalp or hair
 - They can be difficult to find as they are small, move quickly, and avoid light
 - Pay close attention to the crown of head, nape of neck, and behind both ears
 - Using a fine-toothed nit comb to comb from scalp to the end of the hair as well as a magnifying glass can be helpful tools
- If you cannot visualize lice, look for nits on hair strands within a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of the scalp
 - Nits found attached more than a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch from the scalp are almost always hatched or dead and DO NOT indicate an active infestation
 - Infestation is likely old and does not require treatment
 - To distinguish between dandruff and nits, try to flick or pull off the white speck. Dandruff can be removed easily, but nits are attached firmly.
- If lice are found, wipe or rinse and dry the comb before using it again

Please remember:

- Getting lice is **NOT** a marker of cleanliness
- Lice **do not** transmit infection or disease
- Lice **CANNOT** fly or jump (they can only crawl)
- Lice die within 2 days without a human host
- Nits cannot be passed onto someone else (only living lice can transfer)
 - Nits cannot hatch and typically die within a week if they are not kept at the same temperature as found on the scalp

How to treat the head:

- Head lice can be treated with medications that are either over-the-counter or by prescription
- Some medications kill lice and nits and thus do not usually require retreatment
- Some medications kill lice, but not the nits/eggs, and thus retreatment is usually recommended 7-9 days after the first treatment (follow your drug's instructions regarding retreatment)
- Check household members and individuals who may have come into contact with the infested individual for head lice. Only treat those also found to have lice.

Use the lice medicine as directed on the box. It will include specifications as to how long to leave it on the hair and how it should be washed out. **The CDC warns against using conditioner or a combination shampoo/conditioner before using lice medicine. They recommend avoiding re-washing the hair for 1-2 days after removing the medicine.**

- Have the infested individual put on clean clothing after treatment
- If 8-12 hours after treatment, you do not find any dead lice, or the lice seem as active as before treatment, the medicine may not be working. Talk to your healthcare provider before retreating.
- Be sure to use nit combs (fine-toothed comb) to remove nits and dead/remaining lice from the hair shaft
 - Nit-pick daily for at least 2 weeks

How to treat the home:

- Machine wash and dry clothing, towels, and bed linens that were used in the previous two days by a person infested with lice
 - Use the hot water (130 degrees Fahrenheit) laundry cycle and the high heat drying cycle
 - Items that you cannot wash can be sealed in a plastic bag and stored for two weeks
- Vacuum the floor and furniture (pay particular attention to where the infested person sits or lies)
- Soak combs and brushes in hot water (at least 130 degrees Fahrenheit) for 5-10 minutes
- DO NOT use fumigant sprays or fogs (they are NOT necessary and can be toxic)
- "Spending too much time and money on house cleaning activities is NOT necessary to avoid reinfestation by lice or nits that may have fallen off the head or crawled onto furniture or clothing" (CDC, 2024).

In Conclusion:

- It is unlikely that lice will spread through regular classroom contact
- Prevention includes avoiding head-to-head or hair-to-hair contact during play and activities
 - Do not share combs, brushes, or towels
- The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends regular checks by parents and early treatment with a safe, affordable, OTC medication

