

Lice FAQs

Head lice infestations are common in elementary school-aged children. Lice can be transmitted from person to person and can be difficult to prevent, but by checking your child's head, often an infestation can be detected early and more easily controlled. The following information may help you identify and treat your child for head lice safely and thoroughly.

What are lice?

Head lice are tiny insects that live on the human head, feeding on the scalp several times a day. Head lice reproduce by laying their eggs on the hair shaft close to the scalp. They are not dangerous, do not carry disease and are not a sign of poor hygiene.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice are spread by direct head-to-head contact with another person who has head lice. This can occur when children are doing group work, playing, hugging, etc. Head lice can run from one head to another in seconds, but they cannot fly, jump or swim. Although the evidence is limited and it is thought to be rare, there may be some transmission of lice through objects such as hairbrushes. Evidence indicates that lice transmission at school is infrequent. Children are more likely to acquire lice at sleepovers and play dates.

What are the signs of head lice?

The scalp may itch as the skin reacts to the saliva of the head lice. Itchiness may take weeks to develop. A child observed frequently scratching the scalp should be checked for head lice. Crawling head lice may be seen in the hair, but they move very quickly and try to avoid light so they can be difficult to spot. Adult lice are usually dark brown and about 2 to 3 mm long. Young lice are often lighter brown and about 1 to 2 mm long. Eggs are small and teardrop shaped, white, grayish white or brown, are glued firmly to the hair shaft, and are about the size of a sesame seed.

What should I do if I find lice on my child?

Treatment of the individual: The treatment for lice generally consists of the use of a lice-killing product available at pharmacies and other retailers. There are several preparations available over-the-counter. Purchase one of these products and follow the package directions exactly. Although many products claim to kill lice and lice eggs, no product can kill 100% of the eggs so a repeat treatment is recommended in 7 to 10 days. There are also prescription products available -- you can contact your child's healthcare provider for more information.

Two mechanical alternative treatments that have been shown to be effective can be seen at these links:

http://nuvoforheadlice.com/test/?page_id=9 and <http://www.lice-guard.com/products/robi-comb-electric-lice-zapping-comb>

Because no lice-killing product can kill 100% of the eggs, manual removing of the eggs may help to prevent re-infestation. Eggs and nits can be removed with a special lice comb or by picking them out with fingernails. The only way to get them out is to pull them to the end of the hair strand and then off. This can be a time-consuming task. Nit/egg combing is best accomplished on wet hair.

A daily egg/nit and lice check is advisable for several days and then every few days after that.

Treatment of personal articles and environment:

- Machine-wash all clothing and bed linens that have been in contact with the infested person during the past few days. Articles should be washed in hot water and dried in a hot drier.
- Although there is debate about whether it is necessary, upholstered surfaces, including in the car, can be vacuumed.
- The use of insecticidal sprays is not recommended because they may be harmful to family members and pets and are of questionable benefit.
- Immerse combs and brushes in very hot water for at least 10 minutes or dispose of them.

Other control measures

- Check other household members and treat if evidence of lice is detected.

- Inform your child's school or day care center and any other contacts such as playmates or others with whom your child may have come in close contact within the past two weeks.

Can head lice be prevented?

The following measures may help prevent your child from getting head lice or prevent your child from becoming re-infested:

- Check your child regularly for any evidence of infestation.
- Tie back long hair in a ponytail, braid or bun.
- Avoid sharing brushes, combs and barrettes.
- Remind/instruct your child to avoid head-to-head contact with other children.

Where can I get more information?

You can find up-to-date information on lice from the following sources:

<http://www.cdc.gov/lice/>
<http://identify.us.com/>