

HEAD LICE – Fact sheet

What are head lice?

The head louse, or *Pediculus humanus capitis*, is a parasitic insect that can be found on the head, eyebrows, and eyelashes of people. Head lice feed on human blood several times a day and live close to the human scalp. Head lice are not known to spread disease. They do not live on animals. Head lice cannot jump or fly, but they can crawl quickly.



Who gets head lice?

Anyone can get head lice. People do not get head lice because they are unclean. Children often get lice because they are frequently in head-to-head contact with other children. They are spread by direct contact with the hair of an infested person. Spread of head lice by contact with clothing (such as hats, scarves, coats) or other personal items (combs, brushes, or towels) used by an infested person is uncommon.

What do head lice look like?

Head lice have three forms: The egg (also called a nit), the nymph, and the adult.



Egg Egg/Nit: Nits are lice eggs laid by the adult female head louse at the base of the hair shaft nearest the scalp. Nits are firmly attached to the hair shaft and are oval-shaped and very small and hard to see. Nits often appear yellow or white and are often confused with dandruff, scabs, or hair spray droplets. Head lice nits usually take about 8–9 days to hatch. Eggs that are likely to hatch

are usually located no more than ¼ inch from the base of the hair shaft. Nits located further than ¼ inch from the base of hair shaft may very well be already hatched, non-viable nits, or empty

Nymph: A nymph is an immature louse that hatches from the nit. A nymph looks like an adult head louse, but is smaller. To live, a nymph must feed on blood. Nymphs mature into adults about 9–12 days after hatching from the nit.



Adult: The fully grown and developed adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs, and is tan to grayish-white in color. Adult head lice may look darker in persons with dark hair than in persons with light hair. To survive, adult head lice must feed on blood. An adult head louse can live about 30 days on a person's head but will die within one or two days if it falls off a person.

Treatment

Lice treatment shampoos (pediculicide) or crème rinses can be purchased with or without a prescription. It is important that you speak with your physician or pharmacist if you have questions concerning the efficacy of the product. Not all treatments are ovicidal (kills eggs/nits) or are weakly ovicidal and must be repeated. Follow the lice treatment instructions exactly according to manufacturers' instructions.

The most important step towards successful treatment of head lice consists of treatment with an effective pediculicide and **REMOVAL OF ALL NITS**.

Supplemental Measures

Head lice do not survive long if they fall off a person and cannot feed. You don't need to spend a lot of time or money on housecleaning activities. Follow these steps to help avoid re-infestation by lice that have recently fallen off the hair or crawled onto clothing or furniture.

1. Machine wash and dry clothing, bed linens, and other items that the infested person wore or used during the 2 days before treatment using the hot water (130°F) laundry cycle and the high heat drying cycle. Clothing and items that are not washable can be dry-cleaned **OR** sealed in a plastic bag and stored for 2 weeks.

2. Soak combs and brushes in hot water (at least 130°F) for 5–10 minutes.
3. Vacuum the floor and furniture, particularly where the infested person sat or lay. However, the risk of getting infested by a louse that has fallen onto a rug or carpet or furniture is very small. Head lice survive less than 1–2 days if they fall off a person and cannot feed; nits cannot hatch and usually die within a week if they are not kept at the same temperature as that found close to the human scalp. Spending much time and money on housecleaning activities is not necessary to avoid reinfestation by lice or nits that may have fallen off the head or crawled onto furniture or clothing.
4. **Do not** use fumigant sprays; they can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.

Over-the-counter Medications

Many head lice medications are available "Over-the-counter" without a prescription at a local drug store or pharmacy. Each Over-the-counter product approved by the FDA for the treatment of head lice contains one of the following active ingredients. If crawling lice are still seen after a full course of treatment contact your health care provider.

Pyrethrins combined with piperonyl butoxide;
Brand name products: A-200*, Pronto*, R&C*, Rid*, Triple X*.

Pyrethrins are naturally occurring pyrethroid extracts from the chrysanthemum flower. Pyrethrins are safe and effective when used as directed. Pyrethrins can only kill live lice, not unhatched eggs (nits). A second treatment is recommended 9 to 10 days after the first treatment to kill any newly hatched lice before they can produce new eggs. Pyrethrins generally should not be used by persons who are allergic to chrysanthemums or ragweed. Pyrethrin is approved for use on children 2 years of age and older.

Permethrin lotion, 1%
Brand name product: Nix*

Permethrin is a synthetic pyrethroid similar to naturally occurring pyrethrins. Permethrin lotion 1% is approved by the FDA for the treatment of head lice. Permethrin is safe and effective when used as directed. Permethrin kills live lice but not unhatched eggs. Permethrin may continue to kill newly hatched lice for several days after treatment. A second treatment often is necessary on day 9 to kill any newly hatched lice before they can produce new eggs. Permethrin is approved for use on children 2 months of age and older.

Prescription Medications

The following medications, in alphabetical order, approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of head lice are available only by prescription. If crawling lice are still seen after a full course of treatment, contact your health care provider.

Benzyl alcohol lotion, 5%;
Brand name product: Ulesfia lotion*

Ivermectin lotion, 0.5%;
Brand name product: Sklice*

Malathion lotion, 0.5%;
Brand name product: Ovide*

School

Parents, of any student found to have live head lice, will be notified by phone. The student may be picked up at that time or at the end of the day. It is not necessary to miss school because of head lice. It will be necessary for the student to be treated with an over-the-counter or prescription treatment prior to returning to school. Proof of treatment (receipt and empty container) will need to be brought to school the next day. The student will be checked for live lice before they may return to class. If a student is sent home multiple times, it may be necessary to have the student checked at the county Health Department before they may return to classes.