Head Lice 101

What You Should Know About Head Lice

Lice LESSONS

Overview

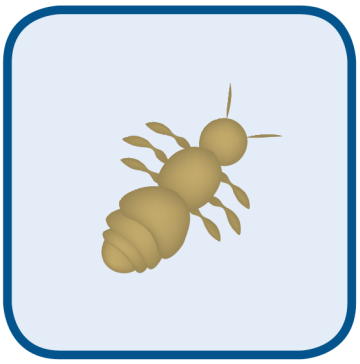
Head lice are a common community problem. An estimated 6 to 12 million infestations occur each year in the United States, most commonly among children ages 3 to 11 years old. Children attending preschool or elementary school, and those who live with them, are the most commonly affected.[1]

Head lice are not dangerous.[1] They do not transmit disease, but they do spread easily, making it a community issue.[1] Additionally, despite what you might have heard, head lice often infest people with good hygiene and grooming habits.[2,3] Your family, friends or community may experience head lice. It's important to know some basics, including how to recognize symptoms and what to do if faced with an infestation.

NIT

What Are Head Lice?

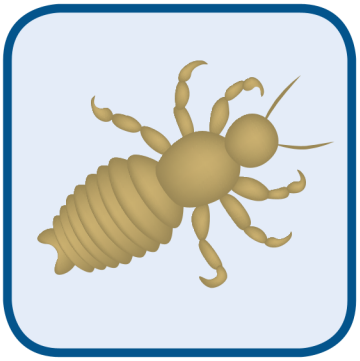
Head lice are tiny, wingless insects that live close to the human scalp. They feed on human blood.[1] An adult louse is the size of a sesame seed. Baby lice, or nymphs, are even smaller. Nits are the tiny, teardrop-shaped lice eggs. They attach to the hair shaft, often found around the nape of the neck or the ears. Nits can look similar to dandruff, but cannot be easily removed or brushed off.[1]



Nymph

Fast Facts

- An estimated 6 to 12 million infestations occur each year among U.S. children 3 to 11 years of age[1]
- Head lice often infest people with good hygiene[2,3]
- Head lice move by crawling; they cannot jump or fly[1]
- Head lice do not transmit disease, but they do spread easily[1]
- If you or your child exhibits signs of an infestation, it is important to talk to your doctor to learn about treatment options



Full-Grown Louse

How Are Head Lice Spread?

- Head lice move by crawling and cannot jump or fly.[1]
- Head lice are mostly spread by direct head-to-head contact – for example, during play at home or school, slumber parties, sports activities or camp.[1]
- It is possible, but not common, to spread head lice by contact with items that have been in contact with a person with head lice, such as clothing, hats, scarves or coats, or other personal items, such as combs, brushes or towels.[1]
- Head lice transmission can occur at home, school or in the community.[1]

What Are the Signs & Symptoms of Infestation?

Signs and symptoms of infestation include[1]:

- **Tickling** feeling on the scalp or in the hair
- **Itching** (caused by the bites of the louse)
- **Irritability and difficulty sleeping** (lice are more active in the dark)
- **Sores on the head** (caused by scratching, which can sometimes become infected)

Finding a live nymph or adult louse on the scalp or in the hair is an indication of an active infestation. They are most commonly found behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the head.[4]

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What If My Child Gets Head Lice?

If you suspect your child might have head lice, it's important to talk to a school nurse, pediatrician or family physician to get appropriate care. There are a number of available treatments, including new prescription treatment options that are safe and do not require nit combing. Other things to consider in selecting and starting treatment include:

- Follow treatment instructions. Using extra amounts or multiple applications of the same medication is not recommended, unless directed by healthcare professional.[5]
- Resistance to some over-the-counter head lice treatments has been reported. The prevalence of resistance is not known.[6,7]
- There is no scientific evidence that home remedies are effective treatments.[8]
- Head lice do not infest the house. However, family bed linens and recently used clothes, hats and towels should be washed in very hot water.[4]
- Personal articles, such as combs, brushes and hair clips, should also be washed in hot soapy water or thrown away if they were exposed to the persons with active head lice infestation.[4]

All household members and other close contacts should be checked, and those with evidence of an active infestation should also be treated at the same time.[4]

Myths & Facts About Head Lice

Myth: Only dirty people get head lice.

Fact: Personal hygiene or household or school cleanliness are not factors for infestation. In fact, head lice often infest people with good hygiene and grooming habits.[2,3]

Myth: Head lice carry diseases.

Fact: Head Lice do not spread diseases.[1]

Myth: Head lice can be spread by sharing hairbrushes, hats, clothes and other personal items.

Fact: It is uncommon to spread head lice by contact with clothing or other personal items, such as combs, brushes or hair accessories, that have been in contact with a person with head lice.[1]

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

Fact: Head lice cannot jump or fly, and only move by crawling. It is unlikely to find head lice living on objects like helmets or hats because they have feet that are specifically designed to grasp on to the hair shaft of humans. Additionally, a louse can only live for a few hours off the head.[1]

Myth: You can use home remedies like mayonnaise to get rid of head lice.

Fact: There is no scientific evidence that home remedies are effective treatments.[8] A healthcare provider can discuss appropriate treatment options, including prescription products.

References

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