

Head Lice



Frequently Asked Questions

What are head lice?

Head lice are small insects. They are very small (about 1/16 to 1/8 of an inch long), gray or white in color and have no wings. Head lice have claws that cling to hair shafts and they spend their entire life cycle on the heads of people sucking blood for nutrition.

Where are head lice found?

Head lice are rarely found off the head. They are most commonly found in the hair above and behind the ears and near the neck. Head lice cannot live for more than 48 hours without a blood meal therefore they do not live long off the head.

What are nits?

Nits are the eggs of lice. Female lice glue the nits to the hair shaft very close to the scalp. A female can lay 50-150 eggs over a three to four-week period.

How do people get head lice?

Head lice are usually spread by close personal contact with the hair of an infested person. Sharing personal items such as hats, headbands, coats, or storing these items close together such as in classrooms can spread lice. At home, sharing items such as combs, brushes, towels, soft toys and bed sheets can also spread lice.

What are the symptoms of head lice infestation?

People with light infestations may not notice any problem. Itching is the most common symptom caused by an allergic reaction to the bites. Other symptoms include a tickling feeling of something moving in the hair, irritability, and sores on the head caused by scratching.

How are head lice diagnosed?

Seeing the nits or lice is the only way to confirm an infestation with lice. It requires a thorough look at the scalp. Lice move quickly and can be hard to see. Finding nits close to the scalp is the usual way to confirm an infestation.

Can head lice spread any diseases?

Head lice do not spread any diseases. Sores caused by scratching can become infected.

What is the treatment for head lice?

Over-the-counter or prescription shampoo, lotion, or cream rinse is used to treat head lice infestations. Follow all instructions given by your health care provider and the product label. Treatment failure is common. If active lice are seen 8-12 hours after treatment, call your health care provider to see if a different product should be used.

Will the medications kill the nits?

There is no guarantee that any product will completely kill all the eggs. It is extremely important that the hair and scalp be thoroughly checked every two to three days after treatment. It is also

important to remove all nits and lice with a nit comb. Most head lice products recommend a second treatment in 7-10 days after the first treatment in order to kill any lice from newly hatched eggs.

Is cleanliness important in preventing head lice?

Infestations are not prevented by personal or household cleanliness, use of shampoos or length of hair. All social and economic groups can be affected by head lice, but African Americans are much less frequently infested than other racial groups.

How effective are home remedies?

Many alternatives to head lice products are promoted because of treatment failures. But, there is little proof that these methods are effective at killing the lice and nits on the head. Some of these remedies include olive oil, mayonnaise, tea tree oil, petroleum jelly, and hair dryers. Never use harsh substances such as kerosene or gasoline. Do not use pesticides (bug spray) that are not registered for treatment of lice such as diazinon.

How difficult is it to remove all the nits?

Hair should be looked at in small sections while removing nits with the nit comb (some people prefer flea combs, fingernails or tweezers). Certain over-the-counter products and white vinegar may help to loosen the glue holding the nits to the hair. It often takes many hours over a period of days to remove all of the nits. Because of many reports of lice that are resistant to products designed to kill them, it is very important to remove all nits close to the scalp.

How can my family avoid being infested?

All contacts of an infested person should be examined and treated as needed. Bed mates and brothers and sisters should also be treated. The examination and treatment of contacts, if necessary, should be done simultaneously. Treated persons should be checked for at least two weeks to be sure the lice and nits are gone. Family members should avoid sharing combs, brushes, towels and other personal items.

Should bug sprays be used in the home or school?

The use of bug spray in the environment is not necessary since lice do not survive for long off the scalp. Vacuuming carpets and upholstered furniture will remove any stray lice or nits.

What is the school's role in the prevention and control of head lice in children?

Because elementary schools and child care centers bring large numbers of children together on a daily basis, they serve as a focus for the spread of head lice. Head lice are spread by head-to-head contact in the school setting. However, the sharing of personal items such as hats, brushes and combs may also spread lice among children. It is important for schools to have established procedures for screening of children, education of parents and children, follow-up measures and clear admission and restriction policies in order to prevent or control an outbreak. Some schools have adopted a nit-free ("no nit") policy for a child to be completely free of nits before returning to school.

Other measures may also help control a school outbreak. Classroom activities involving contact between students may be temporarily suspended, and children may be asked to store coats, hats, scarves, etc., in separate bags to avoid the transmission of lice.

Control measures for head lice will be most effective when the entire community is well informed about head lice and how they are spread, and all families become active participants in the prevention of head lice.

Where can I get more information on head lice?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health and Senior Services <http://www.nj.gov/health>
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov>

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.
Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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