



HEAD LICE (Pediculosis)

What are head lice?

Head lice are an infestation of the scalp and hair with lice eggs (nits), larvae, or adult lice. These insects live close to the scalp and feed on tiny amounts of human blood, resulting in intense itching. Adult head lice and nits localize primarily behind the ears and just above the hairline near the nape of the neck; however, the entire scalp, eyebrows, eyelashes, and even the beard may be involved. Head lice live only on the human scalp and do not infest pets. Head lice are not known to transmit disease; however, secondary bacterial infection of the skin resulting from scratching can occur with any lice infestation.

Who gets head lice?

Head lice can infest anyone under suitable conditions of exposure, regardless of age, sex, race, or standards of personal hygiene. Infestations are most common among preschool- and elementary school-age children and their household members and caretakers. Head lice infestations are frequently found in the home, childcare settings, schools, or institutional settings. Getting head lice is not related to cleanliness of the person or their environment.

How are head lice transmitted?

Head lice, which cannot jump or fly, are mainly spread from by direct contact with the hair of an infested person. Less commonly, transmission may occur by:

- Wearing clothing, such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, or hair ribbons worn by an infested person
- Using infested combs, brushes, or towels
- Laying on a bed, couch, pillow, carpet, or stuffed animal that was recently in contact with an infested person.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

Head lice infestations can be asymptomatic, particularly with a first infestation or when an infestation is light. Usually, the first indication of an infestation is itching, caused by an allergic reaction to louse bites, or scratching the scalp where the lice feed. Scratching at the back of the head or around the ears should lead to an examination for head louse nits (eggs) on the hair. Other symptoms may include:

- A tickling feeling or a sensation of something moving in the hair
- Irritability and sleeplessness
- Sores on the head caused by scratching, which can sometimes be infected with bacteria normally found on a person's skin.

It may take four to six weeks for itching to appear the first time a person has head lice.



Frequently Asked Questions

Can you see head lice?

Yes, but is hard to see adult head lice because they are very small, they avoid light, and they can move fast. The rash caused by their feeding activities is often more noticeable than the insects themselves. Using a fine-toothed louse comb may help identify live lice. Nits, which can be seen by the naked eye, may be found firmly attached to the hair shafts, about 1/4 inch away from the scalp. These eggs, or nits, appear as tiny white or dark ovals. Nits should not be confused with dandruff. Dandruff can easily be flicked off the hair, while nits are firmly attached to individual shafts of hair.

How long is a person able to spread head lice?

Head lice can spread as long as lice or nits remain alive on the infested person, clothing, or furniture.

What is the treatment for head lice?

Treatment is recommended only for persons with live lice and/or viable nits requiring treatment. All household members and other close contacts should be checked and those with evidence of an active infestation should be treated. Some experts believe prophylactic treatment is prudent for persons who share the same bed with individuals with an active infestation. All infested persons (household members and close contacts) and their bedmates should be treated at the same time.

Medicated shampoos or cream rinses with a pediculicide kill head lice. Some pediculicides (medicines that kill lice) have an ovicidal effect (kill eggs). For pediculicides that are only weakly ovicidal or not ovicidal, routine re-treatment is recommended. For those that are more strongly ovicidal, re-treatment is recommended only if live (crawling) lice are still present several days after treatment (see medication recommendations). To be most effective, re-treatment should occur after all eggs have hatched but before new eggs are produced. Nit combs, often found in lice medicine packages, should be used to comb nits and lice from the hair shaft. Many flea combs made for cats and dogs are also effective. After each treatment, check the hair and comb with a nit comb to remove nits and lice every two to three days may decrease the chance of self-re-infestation. Continue to check for two to three weeks to be sure all lice and nits are gone.

When treating head lice with recommended medicine, additional measures generally are not required to eliminate a head lice infestation. For example, hats, scarves, pillowcases, bedding, clothing, and towels worn or used by the infested person in the two-day period just before treatment is started can be machine washed and dried using the hot water and hot air cycles because lice and eggs are killed by exposure for five minutes to temperatures greater than 128.3°F (53.5°C). Items that cannot be laundered may be dry-cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag for two weeks.



Frequently Asked Questions

Head lice survive less than one to two days if they fall off a person and cannot feed. Nits cannot hatch and usually die within a week if not kept at the same temperature as that found close to the human scalp.

Individuals should consult a health care provider to ensure a product is appropriate and safe for them to use, especially for infants and those experiencing pregnancy.

What can be done to prevent the spread of head lice?

- Avoid head-to-head (hair-to-hair) contact during play and other activities at home, school, and elsewhere (sports activities, playground, slumber parties, camp).
- Do not share clothing such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, hair ribbons, or barrettes.
- Do not share combs, brushes, or towels. To disinfect combs and brushes used by an infested person, soak them in hot water (at least 130°F) for 5-10 minutes.
- Do not lay on beds, couches, pillows, carpets, or stuffed animals that were recently in contact with an infested person.
- Machine wash and dry clothing, bed linens, and other items worn or used by an infested person during the two days before treatment using the hot water (130°F) laundry cycle and the high heat drying cycle. Non-washable clothing and items can be dry cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag and stored for two weeks.
- Vacuum the floor and furniture, particularly where the infested person sat or lay. However, spending much time and money on housecleaning activities is not necessary to avoid re-infestation by lice or nits that may have fallen off the head or crawled onto furniture or clothing.
- Do not use fumigant sprays or fogs. They are not necessary to control head lice and can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.

What to do if head lice is identified in a childcare setting:

- On the same day, screen all children in the classroom, group, and siblings for adult lice or nits.
- Any child with suspected head lice should be excluded from the childcare setting at the end of the day. If head lice are confirmed, the child should start treatment before returning. Children do not need to be sent home early.
- To help control a head lice outbreak in a community, school, or camp, teach children to avoid activities that may spread head lice.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/index.html>

Delaware's "Managing Infectious Disease in Childcare Settings" manual:
<https://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/epi/files/ChildCareManual2021.pdf>

Office of Infectious Disease Epidemiology
24/7 Emergency Contact Number: 1-888-295-5156