

HEAD LICE

I know what you're thinking! GROSS! But getting head lice is not as bad as you may think. It is not a sign of uncleanliness, or poor health habits. It is not limited to the poor, or to certain racial or ethnic groups. Head lice can occur at any age, and to either sex. It doesn't just affect "other people"...it could happen to you or your family. So it's wise to learn how to recognize head lice infestation, how to treat it, and how to prevent it from coming back.

What are head lice?

Also called *Pediculus humanus capitis*, head lice are parasitic insects found on the heads of people. Having head lice is very common; as many as 6-12 million people worldwide get head lice each year.

What do head lice look like?

There are three forms of lice: the nit, the nymph, and the adult.

Nit: Nits are head lice eggs. They are hard to see and are often confused for dandruff or hair spray droplets. Nits are found firmly attached to the hair shaft. They are oval and usually yellow to white. Nits take about 1 week to hatch.

Nymph: The nit hatches into a baby louse called a nymph. It looks like an adult head louse, but is smaller. Nymphs mature into adults about 7 days after hatching. To live, the nymph must feed on **blood**.

Adult: The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has 6 legs, and is tan to greyish-white. In persons with dark hair, the adult louse will look darker. Females lay nits; they are usually larger than males. Adult lice can live up to 30 days on a person's head. To live, adult lice need to feed on blood. If the louse falls off a person, it dies within 2 days.

Where are head lice most commonly found?

On the scalp behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the neck. Head lice hold on to hair with hook-like claws found at the end of each of their six legs. Head lice are rarely found on the body, eyelashes, or eyebrows.

What are the signs and symptoms of head lice infestation?

- * Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- * Itching, caused by the an allergic reaction to the bites.
- * Irritability.
- * Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected.

How did my child get head lice?

- * By contact with an already infested person. Contact is common during play at school and at home (slumber parties, sports activities, at camp, on a playground).
- * By wearing infested clothing, such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, or hair ribbons.
- * By using infested combs, brushes, or towels.
- * By lying on a bed, couch, pillow, carpet, or stuffed animal that has recently been in contact with an infested person.

How is head lice infestation diagnosed?

By looking closely through the hair and scalp for nits, nymphs, or adults. Finding a nymph or adult may be difficult; there are usually few of them and they can move quickly from searching fingers. If crawling lice are not seen, finding nits within a 1/4 inch of the scalp confirms that a person is infested and should be treated. If you only find nits more than 1/4 inch from the scalp, the infestation is probably an old one and does not need to be treated. If you are not sure if a person has head lice, the diagnosis should be made by a health care provider, school nurse or other professional.

How can I treat a head lice infestation?

Treatment requires using an over-the-counter or prescription medication. Follow these treatment steps:

1. Before applying treatment, remove all clothing.
2. Apply lice medicine, also called pediculicide, according to label instructions. If your child has extra long hair, you may need to use a second bottle. **WARNING:** Do not use a creme rinse or combination shampoo/conditioner before using lice medicine. Do not re-wash hair for 1-2 days after treatment.
3. Have the infested person put on clean clothing after treatment.
4. If a few live lice are still found 8-12 hours after treatment, but are moving more slowly than before, do not retreat. Comb dead and remaining live lice out of the hair. The medicine may take longer to kill lice.
5. If, after 8-12 hours of treatment, no dead lice are found and lice seem as active as before, the medicine may not be working. See your health care provider for a different medication; follow treatment directions.
6. Nit (head lice eggs) 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.

7. After treatment, check hair and comb with a nit comb to remove nits and lice every 2-3 days. Continue to check for 2-3 weeks until you are sure all lice and nits are gone.

8. If using OTC pediculicides, retreat in 7-10 days. If using malathion, retreat in 7-10 days only if crawling bugs are found.

Treat the household: Head lice do not survive long if they fall off a person. You do not need to spend a lot of time or money on house cleaning 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. To kill lice and nits, machine wash all washable clothing and bed linens that the infested person touched during the 2 days before treatment. Use the hot water (130 F) cycle. Dry laundry using high heat for at least 20 minutes

2. Dry clean clothing that is not washable, (coats, hats, scarves, etc.) OR

3. Store all clothing, stuffed animals, comforters, etc., that cannot be washed or dry cleaned into a plastic bag; seal for 2 weeks.

4. Soak combs and brushes for 1 hour in rubbing alcohol, Lysol, or wash with soap and hot (130 F) water.

5. Vacuum the floor and furniture. Do not use fumigant sprays; they can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.

Prevent Reinfestation: Lice are most commonly spread directly by head-to-head contact and indirectly through contaminated clothing or belongings. Teach your child to avoid playtime and other activities that are likely to spread lice.

Avoid head-to-head contact common during play at school and at home (slumber parties, sports activities, at camp, on a playground)

" Do not share clothing, such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, or hair ribbons.

*Do not share infested combs, brushes, or towels.

*Do not lie on beds, couches, pillows, carpets, or stuffed animals that have recently been in contact with an infested person.

For children under 2 years old, remove crawling bugs and nits by hand. If this does not work, ask your child's health care provider for treatment recommendations. The safety of head lice medications has not been tested in children 2 years of age and under.

Many head lice medications are available at your local drug store. Each OTC product contains one of the following active ingredients.

1. Pyrethrins : often combined with piperonyl butoxide:

Brand name products include A-200, Pronto, R&C, Rid, Triple X.

Pyrethrins are natural extracts from the chrysanthemum flower. Though safe and effective, pyrethrins only kill crawling lice, not unhatched nits. A second treatment is recommended in 7-10 days to kill any newly hatched lice. Treatment failures are common.

2. Permethrin:

Brand name product: Nix.

Permethrins are similar to natural pyrethrins. Permethrins are safe and effective and may continue to kill newly hatched eggs for several days after treatment. A second treatment may be necessary in 7-10 days to kill any newly hatched lice. Treatment failures are common.

There are several prescription drugs used to treat lice, such as Malathion (Ovide) and Lindane (Kwell).

If you aren't sure which medicine is best for you, ask your pharmacist or health care provider. When using the medicine, always follow the instructions provided.

When treating head lice:

1. Do not use extra amounts of the lice medication unless instructed. These drugs are insecticides and can be dangerous when misused or overused.

2. Do not treat the infested person more than 3 times with the same medication if it does not seem to work. See your health

care provider for alternative medication.
3. Do not mix head lice drugs.

Web sites used for research:
www.mckinley.uiuc.edu/health-info
www.cdc.gov/ncidod
www.headlice.org/
www.families-first.com

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