

FACT SHEET

Head Lice (Pediculosis)

Some Common Questions and Answers

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny wingless insects that live on the hair of the head. They survive by feeding on blood from the scalp. These insects lay eggs, called nits, which stick to the shafts of the hair very close to the scalp. The eggs hatch in seven to 10 days. Eggs that do not hatch will be found further from the scalp as the hair grows.

Head lice do not fly or jump. Having head lice has nothing to do with cleanliness.

Head lice are not a health concern. They are a nuisance but do not cause sickness or disease.

How does someone get head lice?

A person can get head lice by having close head-to-head contact with someone who already has head lice or by sharing helmets, hats, scarves, combs and brushes with an infected person. Head lice are most often found among children between the ages of three and 10 years. You cannot get head lice from pets. As many as 12 million people worldwide get head lice each year.

What are some possible signs of head lice?

- Itching and scratching of the head.
- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.



How do I check for head lice?

As lice feeding on blood cause itching, one of the first signs of head lice may be frequent scratching of the head. Scratch marks may be seen on the neck and scalp, and may look similar to a rash.

Adult lice are approximately one millimetre (1/8 inch) long, move quickly and are hard to see. The nits (eggs) are easier to see and look greyish-white in colour and are oval in shape. Nits can look like dandruff, but can't be flicked off. They are firmly attached to the hair close to the scalp.

Look for nits by parting the hair in small sections, moving from one side of the head to the other. Check the hair thoroughly, especially close to the scalp. The most common areas to see nits are behind the ears and around the nape of the neck. Also, look at the top of the head and eyebrows. Be sure to use good lighting when checking for nits. Check all family members as well.

How do I treat head lice?

There are treatments such as head lice shampoos, cream rinses or lotions that are available over-the-counter without a prescription. Some products may not be suitable for very young children. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist to select the product that is right for you. It is very important that only those infected with lice are treated. As products may vary, be sure to follow the instructions for the product you choose. Take action immediately, as treating head lice usually requires two treatments. The treatment will need to be repeated in seven to 10 days to ensure that newly hatched lice are killed. Adult lice can live on the head for up to 10 days, and in that time a female can produce 50 to 150 nits.

If your child attends a school or daycare, check with the facility to see if they have a "No-Nit" policy, which may require that nits be removed before a child is allowed back to school.

How can I control the spread of head lice?

In some cases prevention may not be possible. However, to lessen the chance of you or your family getting head lice try the following:

- Discourage head-to-head contact and sharing of hats, scarves, hairbrushes and hair accessories.
- Tie long hair back.
- Check the heads of all family members and people in close contact to make sure everyone is free of lice and nits
- Treat all infected family members at the same time.
- Tell all close contacts of the person with head lice to check their heads. Also, tell a child's teacher and/or daycare.
- Wash any items that have been worn or used on the head in hot, soapy water and/or use the hot setting of the dryer. Place items that are not washable in a plastic, airtight bag for at least 10 days, or have them dry cleaned. If necessary, discard infected items.
- Extra house cleaning is not necessary, but it is wise to vacuum surfaces where heads have rested (e.g. sofas, seats of cars and helmets) as lice can live up to two days away from human contact.

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