

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.

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.

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. Very few nits will hatch away from the head, and any nymphs which hatch will die very soon without a blood meal.

What is the life cycle of the head louse?

Head lice eggs hatch in seven to nine days into the first nymph stage, which looks like a miniature adult. The nymph takes a blood meal by biting the scalp soon after hatching and will feed every three to six hours. In about nine days, the louse will have passed through two more nymphal stages and reach the adult stage. The adult will stay on the head for its entire life.

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. Finding nits that are more than 1/4 inch from the scalp usually means that they are old and not active even though they are firmly glued to the hair.

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. Sometimes, a pill may be prescribed. Follow all instructions given by your health care provider and the product label. Treatment failure is common. If active lice are seen 8 to 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. Most head lice products do not kill all of the eggs and recommend a second treatment in 7 to 10 days after the first treatment in order to kill any lice from newly hatched eggs.

Is it necessary to remove all the nits?

It is not necessary to remove all nits after using a head lice treatment according to package directions because only live lice cause an infestation. People may want to remove nits for reasons of appearance and to prevent any confusion with diagnosis.

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.

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 can my family avoid being infested?

All contacts of an infested person should be examined, but only those with live lice or nits within 1/4 inch of the scalp should be treated. Bed mates and brothers and sisters should also be treated even if no live lice are found. The examination and treatment of contacts, if necessary, should be done all at the same time. Treated people 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.

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

It is probably impossible to totally prevent head lice infestations. Young children come into close head-to-head contact with each other frequently. Children should be taught not to share personal items such as combs, brushes and hats.

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 a child with an active head lice infestation has likely had the infestation for a month or more by the time it is discovered, he or she should be allowed to remain in class, but be discouraged from close direct head contact with others. The child's parent or guardian should be notified of the infestation that day by telephone, or by a note sent home with the child at the end of the school day. The parent or guardian should be advised that prompt proper treatment is in the best interest of the child and his or her classmates.

Other children in the school who were most likely to have had direct head-to-head contact with the infested child should also be checked. Classroom or school-wide screening has not been proven to be necessary or effective at controlling the spread of head lice.

Some schools have "no nit" policies under which a child is not allowed to return to school until all nits are removed. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Association of School Nurses discourage such policies.

Where can I get more information on head lice?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- American Academy of Pediatrics www.aap.org
- National Association of School Nurses www.nasn.org
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention 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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