



Head Lice

What is head lice?

Head lice are insects that can be found mostly on the scalp and sometimes on the eyelashes or eyebrows of people. Head lice feed on human blood and live close to the human scalp. Head lice are not known to spread disease.

What do head lice look like?

Head lice have three forms: the egg (also called a nit), the nymph, and the adult.

Egg/Nit: Nits are lice eggs laid by the adult female at the base of the hair shaft nearest the scalp. Nits are firmly attached to the hair shaft and can be difficult to remove. They are oval-shaped, very small (about the size of a knot in thread), are yellow/white, and hard to see. Head lice nits usually take about 8–9 days to hatch. Eggs that are likely to hatch are usually located no more than ¼ inch from the scalp. Nits located further than ¼ inch from the scalp may be already hatched or empty nits.



Nymph: A nymph is an immature louse that hatches from the nit. A nymph looks like an adult head louse, but is smaller.



Adult: The fully grown and developed adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs, and is tan to grayish-white in color. Adult head lice may look darker in persons with dark hair than in persons with light hair. An adult

head louse can live about 30 days on a person's head but will die within 1 or 2 days if it falls off a person.



How is it spread?

Head-to-head contact with an already infested person is the most common way to get head lice. Head-to-head contact is common during play at school, at home, and elsewhere (sports activities, playground, slumber parties, and camp).

Although uncommon, head lice can be spread by sharing clothing or belongings (hats, hair ribbons, barrettes, combs, brushes) recently worn or used by an infested person. Head lice survive less than 1–2 days if they fall off a person and cannot feed; nits cannot hatch and usually die within a week if they are not kept at the same temperature as that found close to the scalp.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of the head louse.
- Irritability and difficulty sleeping; head lice are most active in the dark.
- Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected with bacteria found on the person's skin.

What type of treatment and care should be given?

Treatment of the infested person requires using an over-the-counter (OTC) or prescription medication. All household members and other close contacts should be checked; those persons with an active infestation should be treated. All infested persons (household members and close contacts) and their bedmates should be treated at the same time.

Some medicines that kill lice also kill eggs (see recommendation for each medication). Apply lice medicine, according to the instructions contained in the box or printed on the label. Pay special attention to instructions on how long the medication should be left on the hair and how it should be washed out.

Nit (head lice egg) combs, often found in lice medicine packages, should be used to comb nits and lice from the hair shaft.

After each treatment, checking the hair and combing with a nit comb to remove nits and lice every 2–3 days may decrease the chance of self-reinfestation. Continue to check for 2–3 weeks to be sure all lice and nits are gone.

Should a person with head lice be isolated?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends a no-lice policy for schools. The essential components of a no-lice policy include:

- Early detection of head lice infestations through routine screening by parents/guardians.
- Treatment of children found to have live lice.

Students diagnosed with live head lice do not need to be sent home early from school; they can go home at the end of the day, be treated, and return to class after appropriate treatment has begun.

Schools may decide to have additional exclusion criteria, according to their school policy.

How do I help to control the spread of head lice?

- Avoid head-to-head (hair-to-hair) contact during play and other activities at home, school, and elsewhere.

Head lice do not survive long if they fall off a person and cannot feed. You don't need to spend a lot of time or money on housecleaning activities. Follow these steps to help avoid re-infestation by lice that have recently fallen off the hair or crawled onto clothing or furniture.

- Do not share clothing such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, hair ribbons, or barrettes.
- Do not share combs, brushes, or towels. Disinfest combs and brushes used by an infested person by soaking them in hot water (at least 130°F) for 5–10 minutes.
- Do not lie on beds, couches, pillows, carpets, or stuffed animals that have recently been in contact with an infested person.
- Machine wash and dry clothing, bed linens, and other items that an infested person wore or used during the 2 days before treatment using the hot water (130°F) laundry cycle and the high heat drying cycle. Clothing and items that are not washable can be dry-cleaned OR sealed in a plastic bag and stored for 2 weeks.
- Vacuum the floor and furniture, particularly where the infested person sat or lay to remove hairs that might have viable nits attached.
- 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.
- To help control a head lice outbreak in a community, school, or camp, children can be taught to avoid activities that may spread head lice.

Adapted from:

“Head Lice.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015 updated 27 February 2019 from https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/gen_info/faqs.html