

FACT SHEET: HEAD LICE AND THEIR TREATMENT



Female head louse *Head louse egg*
Pediculus humanus
capitis

IDENTIFICATION AND BIOLOGY.

The head louse (*Pediculus humanus capitis*) is one of the three sucking lice species that feed on humans. Their color ranges from tan to grayish white. Each of its six legs end in a claw that is used to grasp the hair shaft. Head lice range in size from 2-3 mm. Head lice cannot fly or jump, but they can move from one side of a child's head to the other in less than a minute. Generally, head lice return to the head to feed every few hours. Away from their host, head lice can survive two days at 86° F (30° C) and seven days at 50° - 68° F (10° -20° C). The eggs of the louse are called nits. Nits are grayish white in color, oval shaped, and are attached to only one side of the hair shaft. They are attached to the hair shaft with very strong glue and cannot be easily removed. The nits hatch within 7-11 days. Thus, treatments that do not kill nits must be repeated one week later to kill newly hatched larvae.

HOW ARE HEAD LICE TRANSMITTED?

Head lice are transmitted in a number of ways besides direct physical contact. When children sleep or sit together, enough time and opportunity is provided for a louse to walk from head to head. Children who share lockers, cubbies, or clothing hooks at schools or daycare centers are at a higher risk of transmission because lice can travel from hat to hat. Sharing personal items such as combs, hairbrushes, hats, ribbons, scarves, headphones or other head coverings can also transmit them. Sharing towels or pillowcases can also spread head lice. Rugs and upholstered furniture are sometimes a source of hair strands with nits or adult lice.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

A louse bite itself is painless but the louse's saliva usually causes an allergic reaction that produces itching. Persistent itching of the head and back of the neck may indicate the head lice have been present for some weeks.

HOW TO CHECK YOUR CHILD FOR HEAD LICE.

A strong light source is required to inspect the child's head. A magnification lens may be required if eyesight is poor. Using a rat-tailed comb, quickly separate the hair in small sections going from one side of the head to the other. Pay close attention to the back of the neck, behind the ears, and the top of the head. Adult lice are found close to the scalp. Female lice attach nits to hair strands 1/2 to 1 inch away from the scalp. As the hair grows, the nits are moved farther away from the scalp. An average infestation includes about 10 - 30 lice. Small white specks in the hair such as dandruff or droplets of hair spray can be confused with nits. Dandruff or hair spray can be removed from hair easily, nits are very difficult to remove. Look for infected scratch marks or a rash on the scalp. Check with a health care professional if you are unsure whether head lice are present.

HOW DO I TREAT HEAD LICE?

Once head lice are found, the problem should be taken care of promptly in order to prevent it from spreading to others. The presence of head lice does not indicate poor hygiene. Unfortunately, routine bathing and shampooing will neither prevent nor eliminate head lice problems.

A parent can be misled by some of the suggested treatments and home remedies available from the internet and other sources. According to the National Pediculosis Association it is impossible to obtain scientific information on the effectiveness of "natural" remedies. One treatment that has remained the same through out the years is to manually remove the lice and nits using a metal lice comb. You can purchase these combs in a pharmacy. The plastic combs provided with some lice killing shampoos are not recommended

because they allow nits and lice to slip through unnoticed. The use of salad oil is recommended to prevent the hair from tangling, which makes combing much easier and faster. Salad oil is recommended over shampoo and conditioner during the combing process. Shampoos and conditioners dry out during the combing process while the salad oil does not.

Non-Chemical Treatment - The following are tips for manual removal of adult lice and their nits.

1. Place the child under good light, such as natural sunlight or a strong lamp. If eyesight is a problem have a magnifying glass on hand.
2. Place a towel around the child's shoulders during combing. Have a bowl of hot soapy water available to rinse the comb.
3. Separate the hair into small sections.
4. Beginning at the scalp of the head, hold the metal lice comb at a 45 degree angle with the curved side of the teeth toward the head and comb downward. After each stroke of the comb rinse the comb in the bowl of soapy water. Continue this procedure until you have worked through the entire head of hair.
5. Use fingernails or tweezers to remove any nits missed by the comb or use scissors to snip out individual nit bearing hairs.
6. This procedure should be accomplished on a daily basis until there is no evidence of nits or adults found.

Chemical Treatment - Pesticide-containing shampoos should be used as a last resort and must be used in accordance with their EPA approved label directions. There are several effective shampoos that can be purchased over the counter. Never re-treat with the chemical more frequently than the label allows. Before any treatment, make sure live head lice or viable eggs are present. Do not use the pesticide-containing shampoo preventively. Never treat anyone with open cuts, scratches, or head or neck inflammations. Absorption of the chemical is greater through broken skin. If you have questions pertaining to chemical treatment, contact your local health care provider.

Collect all clothes, towels and bed linens used by the person with head lice in the last 2 days. Wash these items in hot water and dry in a dryer at the hottest setting.

Dry clean clothes that cannot be washed or put these clothes in a clothes dryer at the hottest setting for at least 20 minutes. Clean combs and brushes by soaking in hot soapy water overnight. Vacuum carpets, mattresses, upholstered furniture and car seats thoroughly. Items that cannot be washed or go into a dryer should be tied in a plastic bag and left untouched for 2 weeks.

HOW CAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS AND DAYCARE CENTERS HELP STOP THE SPREAD OF HEAD LICE?

Transmission can be reduced through proper storage of hats and other garments that may carry stray lice. Facilities should be equipped with separate lockers or cubbies for each child. Headgear, scarves, and other outer clothing that comes into contact with the hair should be stored separately. If separate lockers or cubbies are unavailable, teachers can have children place their headgear into the sleeves of their jacket. At a minimum, children should be given assigned hooks to use throughout the year. Alternatively, individual drawstring bags can be used to store headgear items.

WHAT IS THE "NO NIT" POLICY?

The National Pediculosis Association recommends all schools to adopt this policy. The policy means that children are denied readmission to the classroom until their heads are free of lice eggs. This recommendation is based on the fact that most parents and teachers cannot easily tell the difference between an egg that is viable and one already hatched. By tolerating nits, children are allowed to return to school and unwittingly spread head lice to others. This is only a recommendation and not all school systems have adopted this policy. To find out if your child's school has the "no nit" policy, contact either the principal or the school nurse.

HOW CAN I TREAT MY HOME?

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