

Head Lice Fact Sheet

1. **What are head lice?** – Head lice, *Pediculus humanus capitis*, are parasitic insects that can be found on the heads, eyebrows, or eyelashes of people. They live close to the scalp and feed on human blood several times a day. They do not spread disease.
2. **Who is at risk for getting head lice?** – Head lice are found worldwide. Anyone who comes in close contact (especially head-to-head contact) with someone who has head lice is at risk of infestation. Head lice may also be acquired from contact with clothing (hats, scarves, coats) or other personal items (brushes or towels) that belong to an infested person. Preschool and elementary-age children and their families are most often infested. Girls get head lice more often than boys, women more than men. In the United States, African-Americans rarely get head lice. Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with getting head lice.
3. **What do head lice look like?** - There are three forms of lice: the egg (also called a nit), the nymph, and the adult:
 - a. Nits are very small, about the size of a knot in sewing thread, hard to see, and are often mistaken for dandruff. Nits are laid and firmly attached to the base of the hair shaft nearest the scalp. They are oval and yellow to white and take about eight to nine days to hatch.
 - b. The nit hatches into a nymph which looks like an adult louse, but is much smaller. Nymphs become sexually mature about nine to 12 days after hatching. If any louse is separated from its host, it will die within two days as it must feed on blood to live.
 - c. An adult is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs, and is tan to grayish-white. In persons with dark hair, the adult louse will look darker. Adults can live up to 30 days.
4. **Where are head lice most commonly found on the body?** - Head lice are most commonly found on the scalp, behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the neck. They hold on to hair with hook-like claws found at the end of each of their six legs.
5. **What are the signs and symptoms of head lice infestation?**
 - a. A tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
 - b. Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the lice bites.
 - c. Irritability and difficulty sleeping due to lice being most active on the scalp in the dark.
 - d. Sores on the head caused by scratching which can become infected.

6. **How did my child get head lice?** – Since head lice only move by crawling, the most common way for people to get head lice is through close contact with a person infested with head lice. Less commonly, people may get head lice by wearing infested clothing, such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, or hair ribbons. Another way people can get head lice includes sharing infested combs, brushes, or towels, or even by lying on a bed, couch, pillow, carpet, or holding a stuffed animal that has recently been in contact with an infested person. Dogs, cats, and other pets do not play any role in the transmission of human lice.

7. **How is a head lice infestation diagnosed?** - An infestation is best diagnosed by looking closely through the hair and scalp for nits, nymphs, or adults. Finding a nymph or adult may be difficult as there are usually few of them and they can move quickly. If lice are not seen, finding nits within a quarter-inch of the scalp confirms an infestation that should be treated. If you only find nits located more than a quarter-inch from the scalp (and don't see a nymph or adult louse), 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 your health care provider, school nurse, or other professional.

8. **How are head lice treated?** - The most important step in treating a head lice infestation is to treat the person and other exposed family members with a medication to kill the lice. Wash clothing and bedding worn or used by the infested person in the two-day period just before treatment is started.
 - a. **Treat the infested person:** Requires using an over-the-counter (OTC) or prescription medication. Follow these treatment steps:
 - (1) Only apply lice medicine according to package label instructions.
 - (2) Before applying treatment, remove all clothing from the waist up.
 - (3) If your child has extra long hair (longer than shoulder length), you may need to use a second bottle. Pay special attention to instructions on the bottle regarding how long the medication should be left on and whether rinsing the hair is recommended after treatment. (WARNING: Do not use a cream rinse or combination shampoo/conditioner before using lice medicine, and do not re-wash hair for one to two days after treatment.)
 - (4) Have the infested person put on all clean clothing after treatment.
 - (5) If a few live lice are still found eight to 12 hours after treatment, but are noticeably moving more slowly, then do not re-treat. Go ahead and comb dead and remaining live lice out of the hair. The medicine may just take longer to kill these adult lice.
 - (6) If, after eight to 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.

- (7) Nit (head lice egg) combs, often found in lice medicine packages, should be used to comb nits and lice from the hair shaft.
 - (8) After treatment, check hair and comb with a nit comb to remove nits and lice every two to three days. Continue these twice weekly head lice examinations for two to three weeks until you are sure all lice and nits are gone.
 - (9) If using OTC medication, re-treat in nine days in order to kill any surviving hatched lice before they are old enough to produce new eggs.
 - (10) If using Malathion, re-treat in seven to nine days **ONLY** if crawling bugs are found.
- b. **Treat the household:** Since head lice do not survive long off their human host, you don't need to spend a lot of time or money on housecleaning activities. Simply follow these steps to help avoid human re-infestation by lice that have recently fallen off the hair or crawled onto clothing or furniture.
- (1) To kill lice and nits, wash all exposed clothing and bed linens used during the two 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.

OR

- (3) Store all clothing, stuffed animals, comforters, etc., that cannot be washed or dry cleaned into a plastic bag; seal and store for two weeks.

THEN

- (4) Soak combs and brushes in hot water (at least 130°F) for five to ten minutes.
 - (5) Vacuum the floor and furniture. The risk of getting re-infested from a louse that has fallen onto a carpet or sofa is very small. Don't spend a lot of time on this. Just vacuum the places where the infested person usually sits or lays. Do not use fumigant sprays; they can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.
- c. **Prevent Re-infestation:** To control a head lice outbreak in a community, school, or camp, you can teach children to avoid activities that are likely to spread lice.
- (1) Avoid head-to-head contact common during play at school and at home (sports activities, on a playground, slumber parties, at camp).
 - (2) Do not share clothing, such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, or hair ribbons.
 - (3) Do not share infested combs, brushes, or towels.

(4) Do not lie on beds, couches, pillows, carpets, or stuffed animals that have recently been in contact with a potentially infested person.

9. **For more information about head lice:** <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/index.html>

This fact sheet provides general information. Please contact your physician for specific clinical information related to you or your child.