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## HEAD LICE INFESTATION

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### What are head lice?

Also called *Pediculus humanus capitis*, head lice are parasitic insects found on the heads of people. Preschool and elementary-age children, 3-10, and their families are infested most often. Girls get head lice more often than boys, women more than men. Having head lice is very common; as many as 6-12 million people worldwide get head lice each year.

### What do head lice look like?

There are three forms of lice: the nit, the nymph, and the adult.

- **Nit:** Nits are head lice eggs. They are hard to see and are often confused for dandruff or hair spray droplets. Nits are found firmly attached to the hair shaft. They are oval and usually yellow to white. Nits take about 1 week to hatch.
- **Nymph:** The nit hatches into a baby louse called a nymph. It looks like an adult head louse, but is smaller. Nymphs mature into adults about 7 days after hatching. To live, the nymph must feed on blood.
- **Adult:** The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has 6 legs, and is tan to greyish-white. In persons with dark hair, the adult louse will look darker. Females lay nits; they are usually larger than males. Adult lice can live up to 30 days on a person's head. To live, adult lice need to feed on blood. If the louse falls off a person, it dies within 2 days.

### Where are head lice most commonly found?

Behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the neck. Head lice are rarely found on the body, eyelashes, or eyebrows.

### What are the signs and symptoms of head lice infestation?

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites.
- Irritability.
- Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected.

### How did my child get head lice?

- By contact with an already infested person. Contact is common during play at school and at home (slumber parties, sports activities, at camp, on a playground).
- By wearing infested clothing, such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, or hair ribbons.
- By using infested combs, brushes, or towels.
- By lying on a bed, couch, pillow, carpet, or stuffed animal that has recently been in contact with an infested person.



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### How is head lice infestation diagnosed?

By looking closely through the hair and scalp for nits, nymphs, or adults. Finding a nymph or adult may be difficult; there are usually few of them and they can move quickly from searching fingers. If crawling lice are not seen, finding nits within a 1/4 inch of the scalp confirms that a person is infested and should be treated. If you only find nits more than 1/4 inch from the scalp, 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, a health care provider or school nurse should make the diagnosis.

### How can I treat a head lice infestation?

By treating the person infested with head lice, other infested family members, and by cleaning the house.

⇒ **Treat the infested person:** Requires using an over-the-counter or prescription medication. Follow these treatment steps:

1. Before applying treatment, remove all clothing.
2. Apply lice medicine to dry hair, according to the treatment directions. If your child has extra long hair, you may need to use a little extra.
3. Have the infested person put on clean clothing after treatment.
4. If, after 8-12 hours of treatment, no dead lice are found and lice seem as active as before, the medicine may not be working. Contact your health care provider for a different medication.
5. After treatment, check hair and comb with a nit comb to remove nits and lice every 2-3 days (many flea combs made for cats and dogs are also effective). Continue to check for 2-3 weeks until you are sure all lice and nits are gone.
6. Repeat the above steps 7-10 days later.

**WARNING:**

- Do not use a creme rinse or combination shampoo/conditioner before using lice medicine.
- Do not use extra amounts of the lice medication unless instructed.
- Do not treat the infested person more than 3 time with the same medication if it does not seem to work. Contact your health care provider for a different medication.
- Do not mix head lice drugs.



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⇒ **Treat the household:** Head lice do not survive long if they fall off a person. You do not need to spend a lot of time or money on house cleaning activities. Follow these steps to help avoid re-infestation.

1. To kill lice and nits, machine wash all washable clothing and bed linens that the infested person touched during the 2 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, (coats, hats, scarves, etc.) **or** store all clothing, stuffed animals, comforters, etc., that cannot be washed or dry-cleaned into a plastic bag; seal for 2 weeks.
3. Soak combs and brushes for 1 hour in rubbing alcohol, or wash with soap and hot (130° F) water.
4. Vacuum the floor and furniture. Do not use fumigant sprays; they can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin. Do not hire a pest control company to spray your house.

⇒ **Prevent Reinfestation:** Lice are most commonly spread directly by head-to-head contact and indirectly through contaminated clothing or belongings. Teach your child to avoid playtime and other activities that are likely to spread lice.

- Avoid head-to-head contact common during play at school and at home (slumber parties, sports activities, at camp, on a playground).
- Do not share clothing, such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, or hair ribbons.
- Do not share infested combs, brushes, or towels.
- Do not lie on beds, couches, pillows, carpets, or stuffed animals that have recently been in contact with an infested person.

### **My child has head lice. I don't. Should I treat myself to prevent being infested?**

No, although anyone living with an infested person can get head lice. Check household contacts for lice and nits every 2-3 days. Treat only if crawling lice or nits (eggs) within a 1/4 inch of the scalp are found.

### **Should my pets be treated for head lice?**

No. Head lice do not live on pets.

### **My child is under 2 years old and has been diagnosed with head lice. Can I treat him or her with prescription or OTC drugs?**

For children younger than 2 years old, ask your child's health care provider for treatment recommendations.