



HEAD LICE (Pediculosis)

Some facts about head lice

Head lice are tiny insects that live on the human scalp; they feed on human blood, much like mosquitoes. These lice **do not** transmit disease, and although they are a nuisance they are **not** a health hazard. Because lice are spread through close personal contact, outbreaks are common in schools. Although parents are often embarrassed if they discover that their children have contracted head lice, research has shown that these parasites do not indicate low socio-economic status or poor personal hygiene. Anyone can get head lice.

How are lice spread?

Lice are wingless insects; they cannot fly or jump. They can spread relatively quickly, however, from head to head, usually through the sort of close personal contact that goes on in schools. Lice are also spread through the sharing of personal articles such as hats and other head gear, hair brushes, scarves, ribbons, and so on. You should discourage your children from using or borrowing any personal items like these from their friends.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom of head lice is constant itching of the scalp. This may be accompanied by scratch marks or small red lesions resembling a rash.

How do I check for lice?

Because lice are tiny, mobile, and hard to spot, it is easier to look for their eggs (nits) rather than the bugs themselves. Live nits can be difficult to spot because they are tan-coloured and blend in with the hair. Dead nits are silvery-coloured and easier to see. These silvery oval specks are “glued” tightly to individual strands of hair, very close to the scalp. They are very small, about one-third the size of a sesame seed. They are most commonly found behind the ears and at the back of the neck. Because “nits” can sometimes be mistaken for particles of dandruff, it is sometimes useful to use a magnifying glass when searching. If you do find nits, then lice are sure to be there as well.

What is the best treatment?

Once discovered, head lice can be treated easily, as long as the following four steps are followed:

1. **Check all family members.** If one person in the family has head lice, there is an increased chance that other family members may also be infested.
2. **Treat all infested family members at the same time.** Unless you treat everyone at the same time, head lice can be passed on from one family member to the next.
3. **Use two treatments of shampoo, seven to ten days apart.** Despite claims on some lice control formulations, current evidence indicates that these products do not kill the eggs that have not yet hatched when the first shampoo is applied. A second shampoo will ensure that any head lice which hatch after the first shampoo will be killed before they have a chance to lay any more eggs. Your pharmacist may help you select an appropriate shampoo for your needs. (**Note:** use by pregnant or nursing mothers should be on the advice of their physician or pharmacist.)
4. **Repeated and thorough use of a “nit” comb until all nits are removed.** A nit comb (available at pharmacies) is a fine-toothed comb which is used after the shampoo to remove dead head lice and eggs (nits) which are attached to individual hairs. After the second shampoo, any remaining nits will be dead, but it is still worthwhile to comb out these remaining nits for monitoring purposes.

Preventing re-infestation

Head lice can spread rapidly, so it is important to inform friends, family and school mates of anyone who is discovered to have head lice. **The key to eliminating head lice is to make sure two shampoo treatments are given and to check the heads of all family members after the two shampoo treatments.** Head lice do **not** survive well off the scalp. They need regular feedings of human blood and will only survive in a narrow temperature range (30° - 32°C) and 70 per cent humidity. Lice also have very little ability to move off the hair, and do not pose a risk of infesting others through casual contact with furniture or carpeting. The articles which are most likely to enable lice to move from one head to another are hats and other headgear, furry coat collars, scarves, combs, brushes and hair ornaments. Where possible, these items should be washed in hot water and put through the dryer on the hot cycle. Those items that cannot go in the dryer can be sealed in a plastic bag for ten days or placed in the freezer for 24 hours. **There is no evidence that a major clean-up of the house environment is necessary or effective in getting rid of head lice.** The most effective way to ensure that the lice are eliminated is to follow the “two shampoo” and a follow-up exam process. In the long run, head lice can best be controlled through the cooperation of parents, teachers, and public health units and departments. Once parents learn how to recognize the presence of head lice, regular inspection of their children’s scalps is the best possible preventive measure.

For additional information, contact your local Public Health office or your family doctor.