

Head Lice



Each year millions of school-aged children in the United States get head lice. Though head lice may be a nuisance, they don't cause serious illness or carry any diseases. Also, head lice can be treated at home.

The following is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) to help you check for, treat, and prevent the spread of head lice.

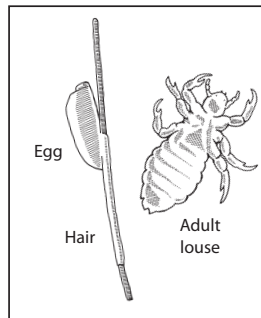
What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny insects. They are about the size of a sesame seed (2 mm to 3 mm long). Their bodies are usually pale and gray, but color may vary.

Head lice feed on tiny amounts of blood from the scalp. They usually survive less than a day if not on a person's scalp. Lice lay and attach their eggs to hair close to the scalp.

The eggs and their shell casings are called *nits*. They are oval (about 0.8 mm by 0.3 mm) and usually yellow to white. Nits are attached with a sticky substance that holds them firmly in place. After the eggs hatch, the empty nits remain attached to the hair shaft.

Head lice live about 28 days. They can multiply quickly, laying up to 10 eggs a day. It only takes about 12 days for newly hatched eggs to reach adulthood. This cycle can repeat itself every 3 weeks if head lice are left untreated.



Enlarged to show detail

Who gets head lice?

Anyone can get head lice. Head lice are most common in preschool- and elementary school-aged children. It doesn't matter how clean your hair or home may be. It doesn't matter where children and families live, play, or work.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice are crawling insects. They cannot jump, hop, or fly. The main way head lice spread is from close, head-to-head contact. There is a very small chance that head lice will spread because of sharing items such as combs, brushes, and hats.

What are symptoms of head lice?

The most common symptom of head lice is itching. It may take up to 4 weeks after lice get on the scalp for the itching to begin. Most of the itching happens behind the ears or at the back of the neck. Also, itching caused by head lice can last for weeks, even after the lice are gone. However, an itchy scalp also may be caused by eczema, dandruff, or an allergy to hair products.

How do you check for head lice?

- Seat your child in a brightly lit room.
- Part the hair and look at your child's scalp.
- Look for crawling lice and for nits.
 - *Live lice* are difficult to find. They avoid light and move quickly.
 - *Nits* will look like small white or yellow-brown specks and be firmly attached to the hair near the scalp. The easiest place to find them is at the hair line at the back of the neck or behind the ears. Nits can be confused with many other things, such as dandruff, dirt particles, or hair spray droplets.
- Use a fine-toothed comb to help comb out the lice or nits. Comb through your child's hair in small sections. After each comb-through, wipe the comb on a wet paper towel. Examine the scalp, comb, and paper towel carefully.

How do you treat head lice?

All persons with head lice should be treated. The following are 2 types of treatment.

Chemical treatments

There are a variety of head lice treatments, including shampoos and cream rinses that can be found at your local drug or discount store. Many of the cream rinses contain 1% permethrin. Permethrin is a chemical that has proven to work very well to treat head lice.

However, head lice treatments may not always kill all of the eggs. A second treatment is often necessary 7 to 10 days after the first treatment. Contact your pediatrician if you think your child still has head lice after 2 treatments.

Prescription treatments with other chemicals are also available, but they are not usually the first choice for treating head lice. If you have any questions, talk with your doctor. *Always follow the directions on the package.*

You can continue to comb out the nits after the hair has been treated. This may help prevent your child from being misdiagnosed with an active case of head lice. And it will help ensure eggs not killed at first are removed.

“Comb-out” method

Some parents may choose not to use chemical treatments and use the “comb-out” method. Damp hair can be combed out with a fine-toothed comb every day for 2 weeks. This approach often fails.

Note: Home remedies like using petroleum jelly, mayonnaise, tub margarine, herbal oils, or olive oil have not been scientifically proven to work. Also, never coat your child's hair with dangerous products like gasoline or kerosene, or use products that are made for use on animals.

Other tips

- You do not need to throw away any items belonging to your child, but you may want to wash your child's clothes, towels, hats, and bed linens in hot water and dry on high heat.
- Do not spray pesticides in your home because they can expose your family to dangerous chemicals.
- If your child has head lice, all household members and close contacts should also be checked and treated if necessary.

About “no-nit” policies

Some schools have “no-nit” policies stating that students who still have nits in their hair cannot return to school. The AAP and the National Association of School Nurses (NASN) discourage such policies and believe a child should not miss school because of head lice.

For more information

AAP Council on School Health

www.aap.org/sections/schoolhealth

HealthyChildren.org (AAP parenting Web site)

www.healthychildren.org

NASN

www.nasn.org

Remember

Head lice don't put your child at risk for any serious health problems. If your child has head lice, work quickly to treat your child to prevent the head lice from spreading.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

American Academy
of Pediatrics



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