

## Frequently Asked Questions about Head Lice

### What are head lice?

Lice, or pediculosis, are small tan to grayish-white insects about the size of a sesame seed that have been around since the beginning of human kind. They have six legs that allow them to attach to the



shaft of the hair. They cannot jump, hop or fly. Lice live for about 30 days on a person's head and lay about 6 eggs per day, adding up to over 100 in a life cycle. At one time, there are usually no more than about a dozen live lice on the head but you may see many eggs.

Head lice need the warmth and food from the scalp to survive and if the louse falls off the head it can't survive

more than a day or so. If a louse falls off the head, it usually means that it is sick or dying and can no longer reproduce.

### Can head lice cause harm?

Lice do not carry disease. They are nuisance, causing discomfort, stress and sometimes skin irritation.

The greatest harm comes from misguided attempts at ridding their child of lice with the misuse of caustic or toxic chemicals. Ridding your child of head lice can be an opportunity to spend time together. Grooming is an effective method of ridding your child of head lice and has benefits beyond the lousing of your child.

### How do I know if my child has head lice and how did they get it?

Intense itching is the first sign of head lice. Lice feed off blood on the scalp. As they feed, they cause skin irritation similar to mosquito bites. Check your child's head thoroughly, especially behind the ears, at the neckline on the back of the head and the very top of the head.

You may first see nits, which are white to yellow in color and appear similar to dandruff or hair spray droplets. You can tell the difference between dandruff and nits by flicking the object. If the object moves freely it is dandruff. If it must be scraped off with your fingernails, it is most likely a nit.

Your child acquired head lice from another infested person. They move from person to person through direct head to head contact. Lice cannot jump, hop or fly but can crawl from person to person anytime their heads are close, like while playing sports or during sleepovers. Lice can be spread while sharing hats, combs and other hair items but is rare since they prefer the warmth of the scalp and tend not to attach to anything other than hair. Children get lice more than teens or adults. ANY child can get head lice. It doesn't matter where they live or go to school, whether they are black or white, boy or girl, or how much money they have. Taking a bath won't kill head lice or keep your child from getting it.

Since your child most likely has had the infestation for more than 30 days by the time it is detected, time is better spent on treatment and education rather than trying to figure out from whom they got the lice. Preventing spread through the family is the best way to prevent further sharing of head lice.

### **What should I do if I think my child has head lice?**

Treatment should only be considered when there are live lice or viable eggs seen. An egg seen about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch or less from the scalp is most likely not dead. This means that live lice could still be living somewhere on your child's head.

Treatment should include FDA approved lice treatment shampoos and mechanical removal. Lice treatment shampoos can be purchased without a prescription from a grocery store or pharmacy. Used correctly, these products are safe; however, follow the directions carefully since these shampoos do contain toxic substances that can be harmful if misused.

Mechanical removal is done using the fine-toothed comb provided in most lice treatment shampoo boxes. These are used to go through all of the hair to scrape off the eggs and remove any lice that remain after shampoo treatment. Removal of the eggs is important so there is no confusion about a re-infestation. Also, lice treatment shampoos are not always 100% effective at killing all viable eggs. For this reason, it is usually recommended to retreat the hair with lice killing shampoo 10 days after the initial treatment. Continue working all the nits out of the hair in between both treatments until all nits are gone.



Consult with the school nurse if you have any questions, concerns or you would like her to check your child for signs of head lice infestation.

### **How do I keep head lice from coming back?**

Follow the directions on the lice treatment package. Not following the directions is the biggest reason why it doesn't work.

Most of the time a second treatment is necessary. If you don't kill all the nits, they will hatch and your child will have lice again - this time without contact from another infested child.

Launder clothing, bedding and towels immediately before lice treatment so live lice don't crawl onto your lice-free, just treated heads. Make sure you launder the clothes in hot water. Don't forget to wash coats and hats! Dry cleaning or placing items in sealed plastic bags works for those items that can't be washed in water. Wash brushes, combs, hats and other hair items in hot water daily through the lice treatment process.

Teach your whole family about how lice is spread and treated. Teach your children not to share combs, brushes, hats or other personal items that are separate for each child.



Check your child's head from time to time for signs of lice. Catching it early can cut down on the number of treatments, save time and money.

### **Myths, misconceptions and truths about head lice treatment**

Using poisons or flammable liquids like gasoline, kerosene, paint thinner or insect repellent may harm your child more than the lice. Only use FDA approved products specific for the treatment of lice.

Do not use hair dryers to kill lice or their eggs. The temperature would have to be turned up so high that it could easily burn your child's scalp.

Hair gels, hairspray, oils or other non-medicated products do not kill lice or their eggs.

Cutting your child's hair or shaving their head to get rid of lice won't keep them away. Lice stick to short and just "grown in" hair too.

Medications that are FDA approved for head lice treatments, whether prescription or over-the-counter are safe and effective for children over two years of age. For children younger than two, check with your physician.

### **Head lice resources**

- National Institute of Health (NIH) [Understanding and Managing Head Lice: https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/magazine/issues/fall15/articles/fall15pg12-13.html](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/magazine/issues/fall15/articles/fall15pg12-13.html)
- Head lice information from expert epidemiologists at the Harvard School of Public Health Epidemiology. Also includes information about bed bugs and ticks: <http://identify.us.com/>
- Centers for Disease Control: specific topics, special interest groups (parents, school) and additional resources [www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/](http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/)
  - 1) Devore CD, Schutze GE; Council on School Health and Committee on Infectious Diseases, American Academy of Pediatrics. Head Lice. *Pediatrics* 2015;135:e1355-65. Doi: 10.1542/peds.2015-0746
  - 2) Heymann WR. Head lice treatments: Searching for the path of least resistance. *J Am Acad Dermatol* 2009;61:323-4
  - 3) Roberts RJ. Clinical Practice. Head lice. *N Engl J Med* 2002; 346:1645-50