

HEAD LICE FACTS

What are head lice?

Head lice (*Pediculus humanus capitis*) are tiny wingless insects that are about 1-2 millimeters long. They live on the scalp and neck of humans. They feed from human blood and must eat at least twice a day. They cannot survive for more than one day at room temperature off a human body.

Where do head lice come from?

Head lice are human parasites and have been here since the beginning of time. They are found worldwide. Lice are "equal opportunity" pests, meaning they can affect anyone: clean or dirty, rich or poor, male or female. Having head lice does not mean you do not bathe or have a dirty home. Lice are species specific. They are HUMAN parasites and therefore cannot thrive on pets and animals.

Do head lice cause harm?

Head lice are not known to transmit disease or infection and rarely cause direct harm. Therefore, they are not considered a medical or public health problem. Head lice are a nuisance and do have the "ick" factor. They may be a burden to treat in terms of time and energy. Having head lice may cause an itchy scalp and therefore, loss of sleep.

How are head lice spread?

Lice cannot fly nor jump. They do crawl. Head lice are spread by direct head to head contact or by sharing personal items such as brushes, combs, hats, towels, hair ribbons, barrettes, pillows etc. They cannot survive more than 24 hours off a human host. Schools are a rare source of head lice transmission. Common sources of transmission are family members, sleepovers, camps and playmates that spend a large amount of time together.

How do you prevent getting head lice?

Once a week you should check your child's hair/scalp and always after sleepovers. The sooner nits (louse eggs) are found, the easier it is to treat, remove and control head lice. Remind your children not to share personal items and to keep long hair pulled back (ie- ponytail).

What do nits (eggs) and lice look like?

Head lice have three growth stages: nit (egg), nymph and adult.

The nit (egg): The nit is laid by the adult female louse on the hair shaft close to the scalp. They are firmly attached to the hair shaft and cannot be “flicked off” like a piece of dry skin or dandruff. They are tiny (the size of a knot in a thread) and often are yellow or white in color. Viable nits are usually within ¼ inch from the scalp. Nits further than ¼ inch from the scalp probably have already hatched. Nits hatch in 8-9 days into nymphs.

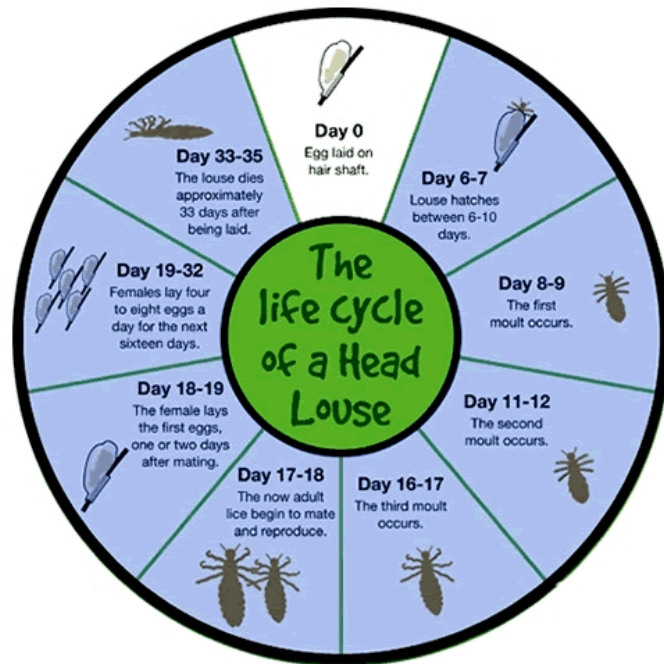


The nymph (immature louse): The nymph looks like a smaller louse. It will mature to an adult louse in 9-12 days.

The adult louse: The adult louse is grayish, has 6 legs and about the size of a sesame seed. Lice move very quickly and often crawl away from a light source. To survive, the louse must feed on blood. The adult louse will live for 30 days and the female adult will lay approximately 6 eggs per day.

What do I look for?

Lice are quick crawlers and are often difficult to detect. Nits are easier to find. Nits are usually found around and behind the ears and near the neckline on the back of the head. Nits are cemented to the hair shaft and do not “flick off”. It is helpful to use a magnifying glass or “cheater” eyeglasses to help visualize the tiny nits.



Yikes! There’s lice! What treatment do I use?

There are over the counter (Nix, RID), prescription (Ovide, Ulesfia, Lindane) and home remedies. **It is EXTREMELY important to follow the product’s directions. Do not use conditioner or combination shampoo/conditioner on the hair before using a lice treatment product. Do not rewash hair for 1-2 day after the treatment.** Many products require a second treatment 9 days after the initial treatment. Treatment should only be done if nits or lice are detected. Keep in mind that home remedies and “natural” products are not FDA regulated and have no scientific basis for claims of efficacy and human safety. **Which ever treatment you chose, manual removal of the nits is a necessary component of any head lice treatment.** This is where the term “nit picker” comes from. To remove

the nit: grasp the nit on the hair shaft with your fingernails and slide the nit down the hair shaft. This is long and tedious job! It will take several hours to do a thorough hair inspection. You might find it helpful to provide your child with an activity while you do the inspection. Usually a book, movie, game, etc help to pass the time. Also if you have assistance you can divide the hair and conquer this task. Along with careful attention paid to your child's hair it is necessary to also check your house.

Wash all bedding, towels and clothing worn in the past 2 days in hot (130 degrees) soapy water in a washing machine. Using a dryer on high heat for 30 minutes will also kill both lice and nits.

Vacuum all carpets, pillows, mattresses and overstuffed furniture. Vacuum the car seats.

All items that are not washable- such as stuffed animals and pillows, can be stored in tightly sealed plastic bags for two weeks. Lice and their eggs will be killed if they freeze so some items can be placed in a freezer overnight

All combs and brushes should be soaked for 15 minutes in very hot water (130 degrees) or disposed.

Do not use any pesticide sprays in your home. They are unwarranted and may pose personal and environmental hazards.

Link to the CDC treatment guidelines:

<http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/treatment.html>

Returning to School

Your child will be excluded from school for live lice, and at the discretion of the school nurse for nits.

Please contact the school nurse if you treat your child for head lice. A parent/guardian must accompany a child back to school after being treated for head lice to be checked by the school nurse. There must not be live lice and a significant reduction in nits in order to return to the classroom.

Dealing with head lice can be a stressful time. The clinic is available to help you and your family during the process of eliminating head lice from your child. If you have any concerns or questions please call your school nurse.

Additional resources:

American Academy of Pediatrics
CDC
NASN
A Guide For Families
Head Lice 101