

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny insects that live on the scalp, feeding on human blood. They lay eggs, called nits, which stick to strands of hair very close to the scalp. Head lice do not cause or spread disease and are not a health hazard. Anyone can get head lice. Having head lice does not mean a person is unclean. Head lice are commonly spread among children and adults who may stay close together in one place, such as in child care settings and schools.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice are spread through direct head-to-head contact between people. Head lice cannot jump or fly from one person to another. Although less likely, head lice can also be spread by children sharing hats, combs, hairbrushes or headphones. Children should be discouraged from sharing these personal items.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom is constant scalp itching. Other symptoms may include scratch marks or small red lesions like a rash. Some children who have head lice may have no symptoms.

How can you tell if you or your child has head lice?

Head lice are often diagnosed incorrectly. Head lice are hard to see because they are tiny and move around. The eggs, called nits, are easier to see. Live nits are very small, about one-third the size of a sesame seed, and are "glued" to hair strands close to the scalp. Dead nits are found further down the hair shaft. Nits may look like dandruff, but they cannot be flicked off.

Check your child's scalp if you think s/he may have head lice. Good lighting is important. Look for head lice or live nits by first applying conditioner on the hair. Part the hair into small sections going from side to side with a special head lice comb. Check the entire head carefully, looking close to the scalp. Live nits or eggs may be easier to find behind the ears and at the bottom of the hairline just above the neck. Treatment should be considered only if head lice or live nits are found. Having head lice once does not protect your child from getting it again.

What are the recommended ways to treat head lice?

Head lice will not go away without treatment.

If one person in the family has head lice, there is a good chance other family members do as well. Check all family members and treat those who have head lice *all at the same time*. This will help ensure head lice are properly treated and will not spread.

There are many different products and ways to treat head lice. Some treatments are proven by research to be effective, while others have not been proven yet. If one treatment does not work to get rid of head lice, then try a different treatment. Parents, students and teachers are advised to work closely with local public health nurses on treatment options.

Ways to treat head lice that require the use of chemicals include:

Non-prescription medications - Shampoos, creams and rinses that contain an ingredient that kills lice are available at most pharmacies without a prescription. Follow exactly the directions for use on the label. It is usually recommended that the treatment be repeated in seven to ten days. Comb the hair well with a special head lice comb after treatment to remove all nits or eggs. Thorough combing is just as important as the use of the medication.

The medications should be kept out of the reach of young children. These medications cannot be used for infants. Pregnant or nursing mothers should only use head lice medications following advice from their doctor.

Ways to treat head lice that do not require the use of chemicals include:

Wet-combing - this method removes live head lice. Wet-combing is cheap and safe but takes time to complete. The combing steps must be followed carefully and completely. Combing treatments are done using generous amounts of conditioner and a special lice comb, every three to four days for a two-week period. Any young lice that hatch from eggs after the first session are removed at the second, third and fourth sessions. This is why it is important to do the full four sessions. *Contact your public health unit for complete instructions on the wet-combing method.*

Usually children may return to school or daycare after their first treatment. Children should receive their first treatment at home the first day that they are found to have head lice. Some schools have a "no nits" policy. In this case, the child can only return to school or daycare after nits or eggs have been removed. "No nits" policies are discouraged by the Canadian Paediatric Society. A child should return to class following the first treatment, but be encouraged to avoid head-to-head or close contact with other students. Confidentiality should be maintained in order not to embarrass a child who has head lice. If a child has head lice a second time, s/he likely has caught head lice from another person who has lice and has not been treated.

Treatment methods not recommended

Methods and products that should **not** be used because they are either not safe or do not work include: insect sprays, motor oil, gasoline, alcohol, flea soap, dyes, bleaches, heat applied to the scalp, garlic, essential oils, and shaving the head.

Are head lice becoming resistant to treatment?

There have been some recent studies reporting resistance to treatment of lice. *All products now recommend a second treatment seven to ten days after the first to ensure that any lice that have newly hatched from eggs or nits and survived are also killed.*

If live, active lice are seen 24 to 48 hours after the first treatment, resistance or a heavy infestation should be suspected. Immediate treatment is recommended using a different product, followed by a second treatment seven days later.

What should be cleaned?

Head lice do not survive for long once they are off the scalp. Head lice do not pose a risk to others through contact with furniture or carpets. There is no evidence that a major cleaning of the house or car is necessary.

On the day you start the treatment, wash in hot water all dirty clothes, bedding, towels, brushes and combs. Items that cannot be washed, for example pillows or stuffed animals, can be placed in a plastic bag for ten days or in the freezer for 48 hours. A child's car seat may be vacuumed as a precaution.

When to call a health professional

Call your doctor or public health unit if the treatments using non-prescription medications are not successful. Treatment of pregnant or nursing mothers and of children less than two years of age should be given under the direction of a doctor only.

Head lice can best be controlled through the cooperation of parents, children, school and health professionals. Once parents learn how to recognize head lice, regularly checking or inspecting is the best preventive method.

For more BC HealthFile topics visit www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm, or visit your local public health unit.

Call the BC NurseLine to speak to a registered nurse, available 24-hours every day:

- In BC, call toll-free 1-866-215-4700