

Head Lice

What are lice?

Lice are reddish-brown insects about the size of a sesame seed. They live and lay their eggs (nits) on hair close to the scalp. Lice do not carry disease and they do not live on pets or other animals. A single insect is called a “louse.”

There are three stages in the lifespan of a louse including the nit (egg), nymph (young adult), and adult stage. The life cycle of a louse is 25 to 30 days; it takes about 10 days for a newborn louse to become an adult. One adult female louse can lay up to 10 nits a day for up to 10 days.

What are the symptoms of lice?

Symptoms of lice include itching, sores from scratching the head, a sense of something moving in the hair, and irritability. Scratching can lead to skin sores on the scalp and skin infections. Sometimes there are no symptoms.

How are lice spread?

Lice crawl from one person to another. They do not fly or jump from one person to another. Most often, lice are spread by direct head-to-head contact with a person who has lice. There is also a small possibility that lice may be spread when a person with lice shares items like coats, hats, helmets, pillows, brushes, and other personal items with another person, or when these personal items come in direct contact during storage.

Who is at risk for lice?

Anyone in contact with an infested individual, or contaminated items, can get lice. It is not associated with economic status or personal hygiene. It is more common in preschool children and their families because of close contact. Girls often tend to get lice more often than boys.

How are lice diagnosed?

By carefully inspecting hair with a bright light and a magnifying glass, lice and nits can be identified. Nits can be a variety of colors including clear, white, yellowish, brown, or gray and are oval in shape. They are usually close to the scalp around the ears and along the nape of the neck. They feel like little grains of sand on the hair.

What is the treatment for lice?

There are a variety of treatments for lice. Pesticides are available for purchase over-the-counter and by prescription. Carefully follow the package directions. Many experts now recommend routine retreatment in 7 to 10 days, preferably on day 9. Removal of nits by combing immediately after treatment with a pesticide is not necessary to prevent spread because only live lice cause an infestation. Treatment options other than the use of a pesticide exist, including manual removal with a fine-toothed comb from wetted hair or in conjunction with a product designed to suffocate and/or immobilize lice. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, or if a child is under 2, consult with your health care provider for treatment recommendations.

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Household cleaning for lice

Only items that have been in contact with the head of the person with infestation in the 24-48 hours before treatment need to be considered for cleaning. Chemical treatment of the environment is not advised.

1. Wash sheets, pillowcases, towels, and clothing in hot (130°F) water and dry for 30 minutes on a high setting.
2. Items that cannot be washed can be
 - run in the dryer on the “hot” setting for 30 minutes,
 - sealed in a plastic bag for more than 2 days, or
 - dry cleaned.
3. Soak brushes, combs, and hair ornaments in a bleach solution for 1 hour. To make the solution, mix 1/4 tsp. bleach with 1 quart of cold water.
4. Vacuum the floor, furniture, and car seat. Throw the vacuum bag away or empty the vacuum canister in an outside garbage container after vacuuming.

How is the spread of lice reduced?

1. Regularly inspect the hair of children in group settings, including schools, child cares, camps, or sleepovers.
2. Avoid head-to-head contact with individuals who have lice.
3. Do not share hats, combs, coats, pillows, or other personal items.
4. Keep long hair pulled back.
5. When doing head checks, wash hands after checking each child.
6. In group settings
 - Provide separate storage areas for each person’s clothing and other personal items using individual cubbies, lockers, or bins with solid walls.
 - Assign sleeping mats and bedding to only one child and store these separately when children are in group care. Children should sleep 36 inches apart or in a head-to-foot arrangement.

Exclude from group setting?

No child should be excluded from K-12 school due to head lice. Head lice are not a health hazard and are not easily spread in the classroom. However, parents and guardians must be informed that prompt, proper treatment is in the best interest of their child and his or her classmates.

There is less information available on the control of head lice outside of school-aged populations. Licensed child care facilities must follow their licensing regulations and their facility policies. Licensed child care centers must follow WAC 170-295-3030 which states that children with lice or nits must be excluded.

Recorded lice/scabies information line: 425.339.5269

This fact sheet includes revisions in accordance with the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics in its journal, *Pediatrics*

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/126/2/392?maxtoshow=&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&fulltext=head+lice&earchid=1&FIRSTINDEX=0&sortspec=relevance&resourcetype=HWCIT>

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider.