

Head Lice (Pediculosis) Fact Sheet

What are head lice?

- Head lice are tiny insects that can live and breed in your hair, close to your scalp.
- Head lice are common among young children and do not spread disease, but they are considered a nuisance because of the itch they can cause.
- Head lice do not make you feel ill but can make your scalp very itchy, cause irritability and make you lose sleep.
- Some people do not have any symptoms of head lice at all.
- Lice have three stages in their life cycle: the nit (egg), nymph and adult.
- The nits are greyish-white, tan or yellow ovals about the size of a grain of sand. Nits are seen at the base of individual hairs close to the scalp and can often look like dandruff.
- Nymphs are baby lice; they look like adult lice but smaller.
- Adult lice are about the size of a sesame seed and can be hard to see. They are tan to greyish-white in colour but can appear darker next to a person's hair. Adult lice can live for up to 30 days on a person's hair but die within days if they fall off a person's scalp.

How do head lice spread from person to person?

- Anyone can get head lice; having head lice does not mean you are not clean.
- Head lice spread from direct head-to-head / hair-to-hair contact with another person who has lice, or by sharing items like hats, hair brushes or headphones.
- You can also get lice from lying on a bed, couch, pillow or carpet that has recently been in contact with a person with lice.
- Head lice do not jump or fly, but they do move quickly.
- Dogs, cats and other pets do not play a role in spreading lice.

How do I check for head lice?

- To confirm head lice you need to find live nymph or adult lice in the hair. Children can have a few nits without actually having a case of head lice—especially if the nits are found away from the scalp.
- To check for head lice use a well-lit room as head lice move quickly, like to avoid the light and are hard to see.
- Head lice are usually found very close to the scalp, at the bottom of the neck and behind the ears.
- To check a person's hair you may need a magnifying glass. Part the hair in small sections with a fine-toothed comb, moving from one side of the head to the other.

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CD-7

Rev 2016/02/25

Should my child with head lice stay home from school?

- Children with head lice should be given treatment and then attend school or child care as usual.
- Teach all children to avoid head-to-head contact with other children and to never share things such as combs, hairbrushes, hats or headphones.

How do I treat head lice?

- Many insecticidal shampoos are designed to treat head lice and have proven to be effective.
- Home remedies—such as mayonnaise, petroleum jelly, olive oil, vinegar or margarine—are unlikely to kill the lice and are not recommended.
- Talk to your doctor if you are pregnant or breast feeding or before treating children under the age of two (do **not** use lindane on children under two).
- Talk to the pharmacist when buying the shampoo and follow the package directions carefully for best results.
- Do not leave the shampoo or rinse in the hair longer than directed.
- Rinse hair well with cool water after the treatment. It is best to use a sink and not to sit in the bath or shower while using the treatment.
- Sometimes the treatment can make the head itchy or can leave a mild burning feeling. This does not necessarily mean the head lice are back.
- Check the heads of all family members, and treat everyone who has head lice at the same time.

How do I clear head lice from my home?

- Head lice do not survive for long times away from the scalp, and there is usually no need for extra cleaning of the entire home.
- Clean all items that have been in prolonged contact over the past 3 days with an individual diagnosed with live head lice:
 - Soak all combs, brushes, helmets, etc. in very hot water for at least 5 minutes.
 - Wash items such as hats, scarves, pillow cases, sheets and towels in hot soapy water and dry in a hot dryer.
 - Dry washable items in a hot dryer for 15 to 20 minutes. For items that are difficult to wash, either dry clean them or store them in an air-tight plastic bag for two weeks.

Other Questions?

Talk to your health care provider or call our Communicable Disease Program at 613-966-5500 or 1-800-267-2803, ext. 349. | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | hpePublicHealth.ca

References

- Caring for Kids, Head Lice. 2015 Canadian Paediatric Society. Available from: http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/head_lice
- CDC. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. 2015. Parasites – Lice – Head Lice <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/treatment.html>

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