

Head Lice- Factsheet

What are head lice?

When a person has head lice, they have *Pediculus humanus capitus* in their hair. Head lice are tiny insects (up to 3mm long) that live in human hair and feed on human blood. They reproduce quickly. Their eggs (called nits) are small, and they are usually found at the base of the hair, close to the scalp.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

One possible sign of head lice is a constant itching of the scalp. Sometimes a person with head lice will have infected scratch marks or what appears to be a rash on the scalp. At times people will not have any itching, especially when lice are newly arrived on the head.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice have no wings and do not fly or jump; they crawl. They are spread through direct head-to-head contact with an infested person. Head lice are rarely spread via shared items such as combs, brushes, towels, pillowcases, hats, helmets, other headgear, and clothing.

How long are people contagious?

Head lice may be spread as long as lice or eggs remain alive on the infested person or in clothing.

Who gets head lice?

Anyone with hair can get head lice.

What treatment is available for people with head lice?

Chemical treatment should be given only to people who have active lice. The presence of nits (eggs) is not a sign of active infestation. Medicated shampoos (i.e. RID®, A-200®, Clearlice®, or Nix® brands) are available without a prescription. Follow the instructions on the package. Non-chemical treatment involves applying hair conditioner to wet washed hair, then combing with a louse comb (special fine-toothed comb). The caregiver sections off the hair and removes the lice a section at a time combing from the scalp out. Rinse and dry the hair once the entire head has been combed. Repeat this process every two days over a 10-day period. Recheck the head for re-infestation once a week for one month. If adult lice are found, then restart the combing process with the fine-toothed comb. Check all household members for live lice and nits and treat using this same regime.

Kerosene, oil, or pet shampoo should **NOT** be used to treat lice infestation. Treatment requiring prescriptions from health care provider(s) may be necessary in some cases.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

No.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting head lice?

If someone in a family has head lice, the hair of everyone in the household should be checked. Everyone with head lice in the same household should be treated on the same day.

Only items contacting the head of the person with lice in the previous 24 hours need to be cleaned. Head lice survive less than 2 days (48 hours) if they fall off a person.