

HEAD LICE FACT SHEET

(Pediculosis Capitis)

What is pediculosis (head lice)?

Pediculosis is an infestation of head lice on the hair of the head. The lice feed on human blood that can cause severe local itching.

Who gets pediculosis?

Anyone may become infested with head lice, regardless of age, sex, race, or standards of personal hygiene. Head lice are frequently found in schools and day care centers and are easily spread from person to person.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice spread through direct head-to-head contact with an infested person or indirect contact with lice-carrying objects such as combs, brushes, hats, or scarves. Lice cannot jump or fly; they crawl quickly. Since nits (louse eggs) are laid by the adult lice, the chances of nits being spread from person to person are minimal. Lice can be spread as long as they remain alive on the infested person or their clothing. Unattached to the body and without a blood meal, head lice survive for approximately 6-24 hours (averaging about 12-15 hours). Pets cannot spread head lice.

What are the symptoms of pediculosis?

The first indication of an infestation is usually itching at the back of the head and around the ears. Itching in these areas should lead to an examination of the scalp for louse nits (eggs). Severe scratching may result in secondary bacterial infection in these areas. Head lice do not carry or spread disease. It may take 2-3 weeks for a person to notice the intense itching associated with pediculosis.

What can be done to prevent the spread of head lice?

Following are steps that can be taken to help prevent and control the spread of head lice:

- Avoid head-to-head (hair-to-hair) contact during play and other activities at home, school, and elsewhere (sports activities, playground, sleep-overs, camp).
- Do not share combs, brushes, or towels. Disinfect combs and brushes used by an infested person by soaking them in hot water (at least 130 degrees), lice-killing shampoo, Lysol, or rubbing alcohol for 1 hour.
- Do not lie on beds, couches, pillows, carpets, or stuffed animals that have recently been in contact with an infested person.
- Machine wash and dry clothing, bed linens, and other items that an infested person wore or used during the 2 days before treatment using hot water (at least 130 degrees) and the hottest drying cycle. Clothing and items that are not washable can be dry cleaned OR sealed in a plastic bag for 2 weeks.
- Vacuum the floor and furniture, particularly where the infested person sat or lay, and discard the vacuum bag. However, spending much time and money on housecleaning activities is not necessary to avoid reinfestation by lice or nits that may have fallen off the head or crawled onto furniture or clothing.
- DO NOT use fumigant sprays or fogs; they are not necessary to control head lice and can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.

In addition, parents should perform regular lice checks on the scalp of children who attend school and day care centers, especially when excessive itching is noticed. If lice or nits are discovered, parents should contact the school or day care center so other children who may have come in contact with the infested person can be checked.

What do lice and nits look like?

Lice are very small insects—about the size of a sesame seed. They are usually light brown but can vary in color. Nits (eggs) are tiny (smaller than the head of a pin), yellowish-white oval specks that are firmly attached to hair shafts. Nits may be found throughout the hair but are most commonly located at the nape of the neck or behind the ears. Unlike dandruff or lint, nits do not wash off or blow away.

What is the treatment for pediculosis?

Treatment for head lice using a medicated shampoo is necessary for individuals with an active infestation. There are several brands of lice treatments available over the counter or by prescription. Follow the directions included with the chosen product. If the infested person has hair longer than shoulder length, it may be necessary to use a second package. All household members and other close contacts should be checked, and those with evidence of an active infestation should be treated at the same time.

Manual removal of nits with a nit comb or fingernails, or by cutting strands of hair that contain nits, is essential following treatment with pediculocides. To aid in the removal of nits, hair can be soaked in a 3% to 5% white vinegar solution, followed by application of a damp towel soaked in the same solution for 30-60 minutes before attempting nit removal.

Retreatment of head lice is usually recommended because no approved pediculicide completely kills nits (louse eggs). To be most effective, retreatment should occur after all eggs have hatched but before new eggs are produced. Supplemental treatment of the environment as outlined above is also recommended.