

Head Lice General Information Sheet

What are Head Lice?

Lice or Pediculosis are small, grayish-white, wingless bugs, about the size of a sesame seed. They have six legs and can look darker on people with dark hair. Head lice live on human blood by biting the scalp. Lice lay oval, hard, whitish nits (eggs), on the hair shaft, usually less than one-half-inch from the scalp. Often nits can be mistaken for dandruff or droplets of hair spray. Nits are firmly attached to the hair shaft with a natural glue substance. Lice are usually found behind the ears, and near the neckline at the back of the neck, or the nape. Head lice are rarely found on the body, eyelashes or eyebrows. The main problem caused by lice is severe itching from their bites. A telltale sign is a tickling feeling of something moving on the head. If the skin is broken from scratching, infection can occur.

The life of a head louse is about a month. The female will lay eggs on the hair shaft at the rate of approximately 4 per day. These eggs hatch in 7-10 days. Within another 10 days, the newly hatched louse can begin the cycle all over again. With human blood to live on, during their 30-day life span, it is not unusual for female lice to lay close to 100 nits. Although it is arguable how long an adult head louse can live without blood, some claim it is as long as 2 - 5 days without being on a person. Nits can survive for up to ten days before they will hatch.

How do you catch Head Lice?

Lice are easily spread where people are crowded together or have frequent contact. Head lice cannot hop or jump, and they do not have wings. They are spread by close contact with infested articles such as hats, brushes, combs, hair accessories, pillows, backs of chairs, car seats or close contact with people who have lice. Once head lice infestation starts it can spread rapidly and prompt action is needed to control an outbreak. If you have a bad case of head lice, you may see hundreds of nits in your hair.

Although it's rare, you can also transmit head lice through head phones, sporting helmets or any foam rubber that comes into contact with an infested person. Lice are more likely to spread through head to head contact or shared items used on a regular basis.

What are some preventive measures?

It is important to spend the time cleaning the living environment as soon as you begin treatment. To prevent reinfestation, all clothing, towels, bedding, mattress pad, pillows and stuffed animals that can be washed should be thoroughly laundered once all those with head lice begin their treatment. Laundry should be washed in hot water (125° F) and dried in a hot dryer or dry cleaned if not washable. Vacuum sofas and chairs. Combs, brushes and hair accessories should be soaked for at least 15 minutes in hot water (over 125°F, equal to hot tap water in most homes). Unwashable items can be enclosed in plastic bags, and securely tied for two weeks. If you have freezing temperatures, 32°F or lower in your area, place plastic bags outside for several days, or in your freezer. Head lice cannot survive freezing temperatures or in water.

Thoroughly vacuum all mattresses, carpeting, furniture and baby safety car seats. Fumigation of living areas is not necessary. It is important to vacuum the car, paying special attention to head rests and using the crevice tool to get into the cracks of the seats. Make sure to remove vacuum bag and throw it away.

In school or communal settings:

Teach children never to share combs, brushes, hats, scarves or hair accessories. Instruct them to put all mittens, scarves and hats inside coat sleeves or in their backpacks. Try not to let coats in lockers touch, or place coat and accessories in backpacks. Helmets, headsets, and other shared head gear should be cleaned as often as necessary to help prevent spreading head lice in school and communal settings. Remember that head lice will attack anyone; even the cleanest family from the best of homes is not immune to an outbreak of lice. Having head lice is very common, as many as 12 million people get lice every year. Girls are particularly susceptible, especially those with long hair. Diligence is required to rid your family of head lice, but it can be done without using harsh chemical treatments.

The information above was compiled using the following sources:

Centers for Disease Control
National Pediculosis Association
Childfun.com
Medline Plus
Harvard School of Public Health