

Head Lice Fact Sheet

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny insects that live on the human scalp. These insects lay eggs called nits, which stick to the hair close to the scalp. Head lice do not spread disease. Having head lice does not mean you are not clean.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice are spread by head-to-head contact with another person who has head lice. They cannot fly, jump or swim. Brushes and combs can transfer mature head lice. Lice are not likely to leave a warm head to lurk in clothing, furniture and bed linen where it is cold and there isn't any food. Therefore these items are less likely to spread head lice.

What are signs of head lice?

- One of the first signs may be itching or scratching
- Crawling head lice are hard to see because they can run quickly (up to 30 cm per minute) and hide from searching hands. Adult lice are usually dark brown and about 2-3 mm long. Hatchlings (young lice) are often a lighter brown and about 1-2 mm long.
- Eggs (nits) are easier to see.
- Nits are firmly attached to the hair close to the scalp.
- Nits are grey-white, oval in shape and are about the size of a grain of salt.
- Nits may look like dandruff but cannot be flicked off.

How do I look for head lice?

1. Shampoo the hair.
2. Rinse and towel dry.
3. Put a generous amount of inexpensive conditioner to cover the whole scalp.
4. Untangle the hair with a wide tooth comb.
5. Section and comb the hair with a metal fine-tooth nit comb which easily separates the hair and has teeth that do not bunch together. An example of this is the LiceMeister® Comb. After each stroke, wipe the comb on a paper towel and look for lice. Pay particular attention to the hair behind the ears and at the nape of the neck, and be sure to comb out the whole head.

What do I do if I find head lice?

- Using the conditioner method, check all family members to see if anyone else has head lice. Treatment is necessary for only those who have lice and/or eggs. It is important that these people be treated at the same time.
- Choose one of the treatments on the attached pages and follow the instructions carefully.

- Inform the school or daycare and all close contacts including friends and relatives
- When treatment is completed, with all the head lice and eggs removed, check the hair regularly, e.g., weekly, for any further head lice infestation. The earlier the detection, the better.

Household Cleaning

Head lice do not live long away from the scalp and nits are unlikely to hatch at room temperature. Excessive cleaning of personal, school and household items is therefore not necessary. As a precaution, wash bed linen, hats, combs, or brushes in hot water and dry in a hot dryer. Storing items in plastic bags for 10-14 days also kills the lice.

Exclusion from School/Daycare

The Department of Health (2003) recommends that children be excluded from school/daycare until the **first** treatment for head lice is complete and there is no evidence of live crawling lice. A few remaining eggs are not a reason for continued exclusion; **however, the parent must continue treatment until all eggs and hatchlings have been removed.**

'Trouble-shooting' Checklist

If treatment is unsuccessful, check the following:

- Was the insecticide/non-insecticide treatment applied exactly as directed and repeated in 7-10 days?
- Was the hair combed and checked **daily** using plenty of conditioner, and all visible nits removed for 10 days (the hatch cycle of the eggs)?
- Was a good quality metal fine tooth 'nit' comb used?
- Have **all** other household members been checked and treated if necessary?

Prevention Activities/Ideas to Help Prevent Infestation

- **Check your child's hair every week** for head lice and eggs (nits) – use a metal fine tooth nit comb and plenty of hair conditioner to make the task easier and more effective. To help children sit still for this, offer distracting activities, e.g., play a favorite video, provide games, encourage reading, etc.
- **Tie long hair back** – braid and/or put up if possible.
- **Consider applying hair gel or mousse** – these do not prevent or repel lice but help keep stray hair strands from contact with other heads.
- **Avoid sharing combs, brushes, hats, elastics and headbands.**
- **Remind your child to try to avoid head-to-head contact** with other children, e.g., when working at the computer with others, or when playing, or hugging.