

Head Lice Fact Sheet

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny insects that live on the human scalp. These insects lay eggs (nits) which stick to the hair close to the scalp. Head lice are not a health risk, just a nuisance. They do not spread disease and they affect people from all walks of life.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice are spread by head-to-head contact with another person who has head lice. Head lice are unable to fly, jump or swim. Brushes and combs may 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 is no food. Therefore these items are not likely to spread head lice.

What are the signs of head lice?

One of the first signs of head lice maybe an itchy head. Children may say they have a tickling feeling on their head or maybe very itchy on their scalp.

Crawling head lice are hard to see because they run quickly.

- **What do lice and lice eggs look like?** Adult lice are usually dark brown and about 2 to 3 mm long. Young lice are often a lighter brown and about 1 to 2 mm long.
- Eggs (nits) are easier to see. Nits are grey-white, oval in shape and are about the size of a grain of salt.
- Nits are firmly attached to the hair close to the scalp.
- Nits may look like dandruff but do not flick off.

What do I do if I find head lice?

- Check all family members to see if anyone else has head lice. Treatment is necessary for only those who have lice. 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 so they may advise other parents to check their child's hair. Also inform other contacts including playgroups, neighbours and relatives.
- When treatment is completed and the head lice and eggs have been removed, check the hair regularly for the next four weeks for any further eggs or lice. The earlier head lice are detected the better.

How do I treat head lice?

Choose a method that best suits you and your family. For successful removal of head lice, be sure to follow the directions of the treatment **exactly**.

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 and hats in hot water and dry in a hot dryer. Wash combs, brushes or anything put on the head with soap and hot water for 10 minutes. Storing items in plastic bags for 10 to 14 days will kill the lice.

If treatment is unsuccessful, check the following:

- Was treatment applied exactly as recommended by package instructions?
- Was treatment repeated in 7 to 10 days?
- Was the 10-day conditioning treatment continued for 10 days (hatching cycle of the eggs)?
- Were as many eggs as possible removed **every day**?
- Was a fine tooth 'nit' comb used?

- **Ideas to Help Prevent Infestation** Check your child's hair every week for head lice and eggs (nits). Be particularly watchful after sleepovers, camp, after-school breaks and at the beginning of the school year.
- Tie long hair back, braid or put up if possible.
- Consider applying hair gel or mousse to keep stray hair strands from contact with other heads.
- Avoid sharing combs, brushes, hats, hair bands, scrunchies and head sets.
- Try to avoid head-to-head contact with other children, such as when working at the computer with others, playing or hugging.
- Encourage children to put hats and scarves in the sleeves of their coats.

Regular inspection of your child's scalp is the best possible measure for prevention.

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Sources: Canadian Pediatric Society, University of Toronto, Public Health, Framingham School Health Services, Harvard School of Public Health, The Stafford Group

How to Detect Head Lice

Head lice will only survive two to four days away from the scalp at normal room temperature. Nits (lice eggs) will not hatch if away from the scalp as they need the scalp's temperature to hatch.

To determine if there is a case of head lice, a live louse needs to be found on the head.

To detect lice you will need the following:

- plastic or metal lice comb
- regular comb
- towel
- tissue or paper towel
- plastic bag
- white colored hair conditioner
- old toothbrush
- rubbing alcohol
- hot water
- magnifying glass
- well lit room
- hair clips

Procedure:

1. Check for lice in a well lit room.
2. Wash the hair well and towel dry.
3. Place a dry towel on the shoulders.
4. Cover hair in white conditioner.
5. Comb the hair with a regular comb.
6. Use a nit comb to comb from the top of the head to the ends of the hair with the teeth of the comb touching the scalp. Search the entire head, the most common areas where nits are found are around the ears and the nape of the neck.
7. After each stroke check the teeth of the comb carefully for lice or nits then wipe comb with a tissue and discard in garbage bag. Use a magnifying glass as nits are tiny.
8. Use hair clips to pin up hair once an area has been combed five times.
9. A complete combing of a head will take 15 to 20 minutes.
10. If live lice are found then treatment will be required. Wash the hair to remove the conditioner before beginning the treatment. [Pesticide free options are available.](#)
11. Tie up garbage bag and discard.
12. Clean teeth of combs with old toothbrush then wash combs and hair clips in soapy hot water, then soak in rubbing alcohol, Lysol or hot water for 10 minutes.

Adult lice are the size of a sesame seed and are capable of changing their colour to match their surroundings. Newly hatched lice called nymphs are about the size of a pin head and may be clear coloured or red depending when they last ate. The nits (lice eggs) are very small and silver-gray in colour and stick to the shaft of the hair close to the scalp.

How to Remove Nits (Lice eggs)

Nit Picking:

The treatment of head lice is a long process that can take up to 21 days. The manual removal of the nits (lice eggs) must be done. Nit removal is the most important step.

Nit picking needs to be done daily to remove any nits that may be present. If all nits are not removed they will hatch into crawling lice and the female lice will lay more eggs.

A nit comb is recommended for finding and removing nits from the head. The comb can be found in your local drugstore.

Nit removal done properly takes time. Be patient and allow your child to watch a movie, watch television, read a book or play a game while it is being done.

Instructions:

- Work under good light on wet hair.
- Visibility is important, a magnifying glass or drugstore reading glasses may help you to see the tiny eggs
- Use a regular brush or comb to remove tangles, divide the hair in sections and fasten off hair that is not being worked on with a hairclip.
- Use fingernails (may be more effective) or the nit comb and go through each section of hair from the scalp to the end of the hair. The nit comb recommended would have round metal or plastic teeth that are 4-5 cm long and have a separation of 1 mm. Dispose of lice nits carefully in the trash or toilet.
- Look through each section of hair and remove any live lice or nits attached to the hair, go on to the next section of hair until the entire scalp has been completed and no more lice or nits are found.
- **Nit picking needs to be done daily** until after the second treatment and all nits are gone.
- Wash combs, brushes or anything used to search the head with soap and water, then soak these items in rubbing alcohol, Lysol or hot water for ten minutes.

Sources: CPS Infectious Disease and Immunization Committee, University of Toronto, Public Health, Framingham School Health Services, Harvard School of Public Health

Head Lice Treatment Options

Pediculicide (Insecticide):		
Pyrethrin/Piperonyl butoxide (PPB)		2nd Treatment Required
Brand Names:	R&C ®	Yes
	Licetrol ®	Yes
	Pronto ®	Yes
Permethrin		
Brand Names:	Kwellada P ®	Yes
	Nix ®	Yes
Lindane		
Brand Names:	PMS-Lindane ®	Yes
Non-Pediculicide:		
Isopropyl Myristate		
Brand Names:	Resultz ®	Yes
	Hair Clean 1-2-3 ®	Yes (3 applications are required @ 5 day Intervals)
Alternative Home Products:		
See fact sheet for 10-day hair conditioner treatment		

Adapted from Nova Scotia Public Health Services Health Promotion and Protection 2008

Non-insecticidal Home Treatment for Head Lice

10-Day Hair Conditioner Treatment

The use of hair conditioner is helpful in the process to remove head lice. Apply white hair conditioner to the head before using a nit comb to remove live lice and eggs (nits).

Any type of hair conditioner may be used, preferably white in colour, including inexpensive 'generic' brands, together with a fine-tooth nit comb. It is an alternative to pesticide treatments.

How does it work?

The hair conditioner prevents the lice from crawling and makes it easier to trap them in the teeth of the comb. Hair conditioner also makes combing the hair easier, especially when using a fine-tooth nit comb.

Why the 10-day treatment period?

Lice eggs (nits) will hatch between 7 to 10 days after being laid on the hair shaft. The 10-day treatment period is recommended as it is the most effective time to break the reproductive cycle of the head lice. Lice lay about six eggs a day, if even one or two lice are missed the cycle of infestation will continue.

Instructions

- Apply plenty of hair conditioner to the hair until completely soaked. White hair conditioner makes it easier to see the head lice.
- Comb conditioner through with an ordinary comb or brush to remove tangles.
- Comb and separate sections of the hair with a metal fine-tooth nit comb in four directions – forwards, backwards, left and right. Use additional conditioner if the comb pulls the hair or the hair is too dry.
- Wipe the comb on a white paper towel to check that the lice and eggs (nits) are being removed. You may need to use a magnifying glass and a strong light to see the lice and eggs.
- Rinse the hair conditioner from the hair and dry the hair.
- Repeat this process every day for 10 days to cover the hatching period of the eggs.
- After completion of the 10-day treatment, continue to check for lice or eggs once a week for at least four weeks.
- Check all other household members for head lice using the method described above.