

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