

Head Lice Fact Sheet

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

Head lice are very common among young children, especially in child care programs and schools. Head lice spread easily among children who are together in one place.

How are head lice spread?

- Head lice spread through direct contact among children or indirectly on items such as hats, combs, hairbrushes and head phones. They don't fly or hop, but they can crawl very quickly.
- Although head lice often make the scalp itchy, it is possible to have them without any symptoms.
- Head lice can't live on pets, such as cats or dogs.
- Head lice can live up to 3 days off the scalp. Although the eggs can also survive for up to 3 days, they need a warm environment to develop. They are not likely to hatch at room temperature.

How can parents tell if their child has head lice?

To diagnosis a case of head lice, you need to find live lice. On average, children with head lice will have no more than 10 to 20 live lice. They move fast, and are only about the size of a sesame seed - they can be hard to find.

Finding nits, or eggs (which are bigger and easier to see), close to the scalp suggests that there may be a case of head lice. Remember, though, that a child can have a few nits without actually having a case of head lice.

If you think your child may have head lice, check the hair for nits immediately, after one week, and then again after two weeks if another child has head lice.

Where to look

- close to the scalp
- behind the ears
- the back of the neck
- top of the head

What to look for

- One of the first signs of head lice is itching and scratching the head. Still, it's possible to have head lice without any symptoms
- Adult lice, which are 2-4 mm long, are hard to see
- The nits (eggs) are easier to see. Nits are greyish-white and oval shaped
- Nits are firmly attached to the hair close to the scalp; they may look like dandruff but cannot be flicked off

How to check for head lice

Good lighting is important. Look for nits by parting hair in small sections, going from one side of the head to the other. Check carefully, looking close to the scalp

How can head lice be treated?

There are a number of very effective treatments for head lice. All the treatments contain an insecticide that kills the lice.

In Canada, three insecticides are approved for use in treating head lice:

- pyrethrin (found in R+C[®] shampoo/conditioner)
- permethrin (Nix[®] or Kwellada-P[®])
- lindane (Hexit[®] or PMS-Lindane shampoo)

Pyrethrin and permethrin are quite safe to humans. Lindane, however, can be toxic. Products with lindane should not be used on infants or young children.

You don't need a prescription for these products. Follow package directions carefully.

Don't leave the shampoo or rinse in hair longer than directed. Rinse hair well after the treatment. It's best to do the treatment and rinsing over a sink, not in the bath or shower, so that other parts of the body don't come in contact with the product.

Be sure to repeat the treatment in 7 to 10 days.

Do not treat anyone with a head lice product unless you find lice in their hair. Check family members (adults and children) if someone in the house has head lice.

Sometimes, the treatments will make the scalp itchy. If your child is scratching after treatment, it doesn't necessarily mean the lice are back. You need to find live lice to make this diagnosis.

What about other treatments for head lice?

- Some people use home remedies like mayonnaise, petroleum jelly, olive oil or margarine. Although these products may make it hard for lice to breathe, they probably won't kill them.
- There isn't any evidence that products like tea tree oil or aromatherapy are effective in treating head lice.
- Never use gasoline or kerosene. These products can be extremely dangerous.

Should the house be disinfected if someone has head lice?

Since head lice don't live long off the scalp, and since the eggs aren't likely to hatch at room temperature, you don't need to do excessive cleaning.

If you want to get rid of lice or nits from specific items, like hats or pillowcases, either one of these methods will kill them:

- Wash the items in hot water (66°C) and dry in a hot dryer for 15 minutes; or
- Store the items in an airtight plastic bag for two weeks

Should children with head lice stay home from school?

Children with head lice should be treated, and should attend school or child care as usual.

“No-nit” policies, which keep children with head lice away from child care, aren’t effective. Here’s why:

- Head lice are common among young children
- Head lice don’t spread disease
- Cases of head lice are often misdiagnosed. To confirm a case of head lice, you need to find live lice
- Children may have head lice for several weeks with no symptoms

Children with head lice should be treated and should avoid head-to-head contact with other children until the lice are gone.

Child care programs should let families know when there is a case of head lice, and provide information about diagnosis and treatment.