

Head Lice

Public Health – Factsheet

What are head lice?

Head lice are small insects that live on people's heads and feed on human blood. Head lice may be found anywhere on the head, but are usually found on the scalp, along the neckline and behind the ears.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

You may get a tickling feeling on your head. When lice bite the scalp, it may cause itching and sometimes redness. Itchiness does not always mean that a person has head lice as other things can cause an itchy scalp. It is also possible to have head lice and not have any symptoms.

Can head lice cause disease?

Head lice do not cause or carry disease. Scratching an itchy scalp may break the skin and cause infection but this does not happen often. Head lice are not a health hazard. They are very common and are not a symptom of poor hygiene.

What do head lice and their eggs look like?

Adult head lice are about the size of a sesame seed. They have six legs and are usually tan, grayish white or brown in colour. Head lice can crawl quickly through the hair and are difficult to spot. They do not have wings and cannot fly or jump.

Head lice lay their eggs on the hair shaft very close to the scalp with a waterproof "glue." This makes it difficult to wash them off or brush them out like dandruff. When the eggs hatch, the empty eggshell is left. This is called a "nit." The nit remains stuck to the hair shaft. It is hard to tell the difference between an egg and a nit. Eggs that have hatched (nits) are sometimes easier to see than unhatched eggs because they appear white in colour against dark hair. Dandruff, scabs and other hair debris are sometimes mistaken for lice, eggs or nits.



Actual size of the three lice forms compared to a penny (CDC Photo)

How do you get head lice?

Head lice are spread by head-to-head contact with someone who has head lice. It is possible to spread lice by sharing personal items that have recently touched the head of someone with lice – such as hats, combs and brushes – but this is much less likely. Head lice cannot be spread to people from pets or other animals.

Who gets head lice?

Anyone with scalp hair can get head lice. Head lice may also be found on people's eyebrows and eyelashes. It is more common among young children attending child care facilities and elementary schools as well as household members of children who have head lice. Clean hair offers no protection against getting lice. Head lice are not a symptom of poor hygiene.

How can you tell if a person has head lice?

At least one moving head louse (singular for lice) must be found on the head. Finding eggs or nits does not mean that a person has active head lice. Other things can cause an itchy scalp, so itchiness alone does not mean a person has head lice.

What is the best way to look for head lice?

Combing the hair by a parent or family member is a good way to look for lice.

1. Wash hair well with ordinary shampoo and leave damp. Wet hair slows down the lice, making them easier to remove. Soaking the hair with oil or conditioner from the scalp to the ends may make combing easier.
2. In good light, comb the hair with a wide-toothed ordinary comb to straighten and de-tangle the hair.
3. Switch to a fine-toothed lice comb. You can buy these combs at pharmacies and can ask the pharmacist for help in choosing one. Work through the hair in small sections, starting with the skin of the scalp/roots at the top of the head and comb through to the ends of the hair.
4. Check for moving lice with every stroke. Wipe the comb after each stroke with a tissue and place tissues in a bag.
5. If you are not sure if you have found a louse, use clear tape to attach it to a piece of paper. Show this to your health care provider or other person trained to identify live head lice.
6. Repeat steps 3 to 5 until all of the hair on the head has been combed.
7. Tie up the bag with used tissues and throw it in the garbage.
8. If moving lice are seen, wash all of the conditioner or oil out and start treatment.

Who should I tell if my child has head lice?

- The parents of other children who your child has recently played with and may have had head-to-head contact with.
- Your child's child care provider or teacher as there may have been head-to-head contact with other children through work or play.
- Alerting others allows them to check for lice and treat promptly if lice are found. This will reduce spread to others.

If a child in school or child care facility has head lice, do they need to be sent home?

No. Head lice are not spread that easily. A child with an active head lice infestation has probably had the infestation for a month or more. It can take that long before the scalp begins to itch. Infested children usually carry less than 10 lice. The child with head lice should not have head-to-head contact with others.

How is head lice treated?

Treatment should not be started unless there is at least one live louse found. Lice treatments can be bought at pharmacies without a prescription. Treatments or medicines that kill lice are called pediculocides.

Some treatments may also kill lice eggs. Treatment with a lice product that has permethrin or pyrethrin as the active ingredient is recommended. Other lice treatments that work well have dimeticone or isopropyl myristate as the active ingredient.

1. Read the directions on the package carefully and follow instructions. Some products cannot be used on young children, pregnant women or people with certain allergies. If the directions state that the product should not be used on the person needing the treatment, contact your health care provider or pharmacist for advice.
2. Rubber gloves may be used to avoid coming into contact with the lice product.
3. Do not leave the lice treatment on for longer than stated in the package directions.
4. Do not use more or less of the product than directed.
5. Do not use lice treatment on open or infected skin.
6. Keep the product out of the eyes. A facecloth may be placed over the face to help prevent the product getting into the eyes. If the product gets into the eyes, flush eyes right away with lots of water.
7. Rinse the product out of the hair over a sink, not in the shower or bath, so that the product does not get onto other skin.
8. After treatment, comb out any remaining lice with a fine-toothed nit comb. Nit combs can be bought at pharmacies.

9. After treatment, the person treated for lice should put on clean clothing.
10. Comb hair 24 hours after treatment with a fine-toothed nit comb. If moving lice are still found 24 hours after the first treatment, contact your health care provider or pharmacist for help. You may need to re-treat with a different product.
11. If the first treatment appears to have worked and no moving lice are found 24 hours after treatment, repeat the treatment in seven to 10 days to kill lice hatching from eggs that were not killed with the first treatment.

Why does the treatment sometimes not work?

People may not follow the instructions on the package properly. They may use too much or too little lice treatment or they may leave the treatment on for too long or not long enough. They may do the second treatment too soon or too late. Sometimes lice develop resistance to the treatment. Your health care provider or pharmacist can help you find another treatment if they think the lice were resistant to the first treatment.

Does the treatment have any side effects?

The scalp might become itchy after the lice treatment. This does not mean that the treatment did not work. An anti-itch medicine may help.

Do other treatments work?

There is no proof that home or natural remedies such as vinegar, olive oil, mayonnaise, melted butter, petroleum jelly, tea tree oil or eucalyptus oil work.

Lice removal combs may be used on wet hair to physically pull out lice and their eggs. This is similar to combing to look for head lice. Wet hair slows down the lice, making them easier to remove. This is time consuming as the wet hair combing should be repeated every few days for a period of two weeks. This has been called “wet-combing” or “bug-busting”.

Do all of the eggs and nits need to be removed after lice treatment?

No. The two treatments seven to 10 days apart should get rid of all live lice, including any lice that may hatch from eggs that survive the first treatment.

Eggs and nits are firmly glued to hair shafts and are not likely to fall off and infest other people. People may want to remove nits for aesthetic reasons. If you decide you do want to remove eggs/nits, they can be pulled off with your fingernails or by cutting and removing a single strand of hair between the scalp and where the eggs/nits are. A nit comb may help.

How can I get rid of head lice from my home?

Head lice live for less than two days if away from the higher temperature of the scalp. Eggs will not hatch away from the higher temperature of the scalp and they usually die within a week.

- Soak all combs and brushes in hot water (at least 55°C or 130°F) for five to 10 minutes.
- Wash items in contact with the head (example: hats, pillowcases) in the past 48 hours in hot water and dry in a hot dryer for at least 15 minutes.
- Dry clean or store non-washable items in an air and water-tight plastic bag for two weeks. Freezing temperatures can also kill head lice and eggs but several days may be needed depending on temperature and humidity.

What should I do to prevent getting head lice?

- Avoid head-to-head contact with a person who has head lice.
- Avoid using items that have been in contact with the head of a person with head lice such as hats, combs, brushes, hair accessories and pillowcases.
- Have someone check your head if you have been in contact with someone who has head lice. If lice are found, they can be treated right away.

For more information

Talk to your health care provider, your local Public Health Unit or call Health Links-Info Santé in Winnipeg: 204-788-8200; toll-free (outside Winnipeg): 1-888-315-9257. Information is also available on the Manitoba Health website at: www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/headlice.html.

