

# Lice Information Sheet

## **What are head lice?**

Head lice are parasitic insects found on the heads of people. Having head lice is very common.

## **Who is at risk for getting head lice?**

Anyone who comes in close head-to-head contact with someone who already has head lice. Occasionally, head lice may be acquired from contact with clothing or other personal items that belong to an infested person or during play and at home. Hygiene or cleanliness has nothing to do with getting head lice. Lice do not jump, fly, or hop.

## **What do head lice look like?**

There are three forms of lice: the egg/nit, the nymph, and the adult.

**Nit:** Nits are head lice eggs. They are very small and are often confused for dandruff. They are firmly attached to the hair. They are oval and usually brown to yellow or white. Nits take about 1 week to hatch.

**Eggs** that are likely to hatch are usually located within 1/4 inch of the scalp.

**Nymph:** A baby louse called a nymph. Nymphs mature into adults about 7 days after hatching. To live, the nymph must feed on blood.

**Adult:** The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs, and is tan to grayish-white. In persons with dark hair, the adult louse will look darker. They can live up to 30 days on a head. To live they need to feed on blood. If the louse falls off a person, it dies within 2 days. Pictures can be found at <http://www.headlice.org/faq/lousology.htm>

## **Where are head lice most commonly found?**

They are found on the scalp, behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the neck.

## **What are the signs and symptoms of head lice infestation?**

Scratching and sores/bites on the head caused by scratching (which can become infected).

## **How is head lice infestation diagnosed?**

An infestation is diagnosed by looking closely through the hair and scalp for nits, nymphs, or adults. If crawling lice are not seen, finding nits within a 1/4 inch of the scalp confirms that a person is infested and should be treated. If you only find nits more than 1/4 inch from the scalp (and don't see a nymph or adult louse), the infestation could be an old one. If you are not sure the diagnosis should be made by your health care provider, or school nurse.

**My child has head lice. I don't. Should I treat myself to prevent being infested?**

No, although anyone living with an infested person can get head lice. Check household contacts for lice and nits every 2-3 days. Treat only if crawling lice or nits are found.

**I have heard that head lice medications don't work. Why is this?**

Like germs that are resistant to antibiotics, some lice also develop resistance. There are many reasons why medications may not work. Misdiagnosis of a head lice infestation. Other common problems include: failure to follow label instructions and not using a metal nit comb. Combing the hair to remove lice and eggs has to be done.

**Medication not working at all (resistance).** If head lice medication does not kill any crawling bugs within 24 hours, then resistance is likely. Try another product with a different active ingredient or talk to your doctor. Medication kills crawling bugs, but is not able to penetrate the eggs. It is very difficult for head lice medication to penetrate the nit shell. Medication may effectively kill crawling bugs, but may not treat the nits. This is why follow-up treatment is recommended.

**New infection.** You can get infested more than once with head lice. Children often get re-infested from a playmate or classmate. If your child is infested, discuss it with parents of the children your child plays with.

Treating all infested children at the same time will help prevent re-infestation.

**Should my pets be treated for head lice?**

No. Head lice do not live on pets.

**My child is under 2 years old and has been diagnosed with head lice. What do I do?**

For children under 2 years old, remove all crawling bugs and nits using a nit comb. If this does not work, ask your child's health care provider for treatment recommendations. The safety of most head lice medications has not been tested in children 2 years of age and under.

Some natural products are safe, read the labels.

**Which head lice medicine is best for me?**

If you aren't sure, ask your pharmacist or health care provider. What ever you choose follow the instructions carefully and do your research to be informed.

## TREATING HEAD LICE

### **How can I treat a head lice infestation?**

The most important step in treating a head lice infestation is to treat the person and other family members with head lice.

**Plastic Nit combs, often found in lice medicine packages, are not very effectively. Metal lice combs are far more effective. After any treatment, check hair and comb with a nit comb every 2-3 days to remove eggs and lice. Continue to check for 2-3 weeks until you are sure all lice and eggs are gone.**

Many head lice medications are available at your local drug store. Each OTC product contains one of the following active ingredients.

**Pyrethrins:** (Pesticide) Pyrethrins are natural extracts from the chrysanthemum flower. Though usually effective, pyrethrins only kill crawling lice, not unhatched nits. A second treatment is recommended in 7-10 days to kill any newly hatched lice.

**Permethrin:** (Pesticide) Permethrins are similar to natural pyrethrins. Permethrins are usually effective and may continue to kill newly hatched lice for several days after treatment. A second treatment may be necessary in 7-10 days to kill any newly hatched lice that may have hatched after residual medication from the first treatment was no longer active.

**Dimethecone:** (non-pesticide)- Dimethecone is in practically every shampoo, conditioner, and cream on the market. However in products over the counter like Lice MD\* (follow pkg. instructions), the concentration of dimethecone is higher.

**Natural products:** Natural essential oils have been used for decades. While these oils can be safe caution must be used, read the labels. Higher concentrations can be irritating and even toxic to children. Talk to your pharmacist, natural product consultant, and search the internet.

Suffocation - with conditioners, creams and natural oils. Ask your doctor or search the internet.

**Home remedies:** (none are backed by data, some work & others don't), such as mayonnaise, olive oil, or petroleum jelly. Vinegar diluted with water.

## TREATING THE HOME

To kill lice and nits, machine wash all washable clothing and bed linens that the infested person wore or used during the 2 days before treatment. Use the hot water cycle. Dry laundry using high heat for at least 20 minutes. Put pillows in the dryer on hot cycle for at least 20 minutes.

Dry clean clothing that is not washable, (coats, hats, scarves, etc.). Store all clothing, stuffed animals, comforters, etc., that cannot be washed or dry cleaned into a plastic bag; seal for 1 week. However lice cannot live off of the scalp beyond 24-48 hours. Soak combs and brushes for 1 hour in rubbing alcohol, Lysol\*, or wash with soap and hot water, (120 F or greater).

Vacuum the floor and furniture. The risk of getting re-infested from a louse that has fallen onto a carpet or sofa is very small. Don't spend a lot of time on this. Just vacuum the places where the infested person usually sits or lays. You don't need a pest control company to spray your home.

### **Prevent Re-infestation:**

Avoid head-to-head contact most common during play (sports activities, on a playground, slumber parties).

Do not share clothing, such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, or hair ribbons. Do not share infested combs, brushes, or towels.

OTC repellants for the hair, (some do contain pesticides), and natural products can be used such as rosemary and tea tree oil (research the products for safety).

This fact sheet is not endorsed by any official agency or authority. This fact sheet is for information only and not to be used for self-diagnosis or instead of a consult with a health care provider. If you have any questions about the above consult your health care provider.