
Head Lice (Pediculosis)

Description: The head louse is a blood-sucking insect that lives on the scalp.

Symptoms: Lice usually cause frequent itching. Back of the head and behind the ears are the places most favored by lice.

How it is Spread: Most often, it is spread by direct hair-to-hair contact with an infested person. Less frequently, spreading may occur by contact with hats, combs, brushes or upholstered furniture recently used by an infested person. Lice do not jump or fly.

Incubation Period: The eggs (nits) usually hatch in seven days. The resulting lice are then capable of laying eggs in 10 days.

How Long Can a Person Pass the Infection to Others? The infection can be spread as long as the lice are alive. Lice do not survive off the human body more than two days.

Responsibility of Parents and Caregivers:

A child who is observed scratching his/her head should be examined for eggs (nits) or lice near the scalp. Nits are yellowish brown to white, about the size of a typewritten comma and are firmly attached to the hair shaft. Eggs that are more than 1/4-1/2 inch out from the base of the scalp probably are dead or are only empty egg casings. If live eggs are present, so are lice and proper treatment of the child is necessary. Lice are less than 1/8 inch long, clear or tan in color and move quickly.

Control of Spread:

- Exclude a suspected/confirmed case until treatment has begun.
- Remove all nits after the first treatment. This is a good idea even though the child is not contagious at this point.
- Carefully examine the heads of all children, yourself and family.
- Examine heads of close contacts of a case again in two weeks.
- Educate the children on head lice and why personal items (such as combs) should not be shared.
- Wash clothing and bedding in the machine using hot water and dry using the hot cycle or press with a hot iron. Non-washable items can be dry-cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag for 10 days. This should be done with items both at the place of child care and at the home.
- Carpet and furniture should be vacuumed. Insecticide sprays should not be used because they are not effective and have harmful fumes.
- Combs and brushes should be soaked in a sanitizing solution (1/4 cup of bleach to a gallon of water) or lice-killing shampoo used for treatment or soap and hot water (130° F.) for one hour.

- Call the local health department for outbreaks, unusual incidence or an epidemic.
- Encourage parents to inspect children's heads regularly.

Treatment: Prescription medication (Kwell, NIX) and non-prescription medications (RID, A-200, R&C) are used for treatment. Follow directions on the medications. Treatments can be toxic if not used correctly. Regardless of the product used, an effort should be made to physically remove all nits. A physician should be consulted before treating a child less than age 2. Family members may also need treatment.

Comments: Head lice are not associated with poverty, age or sex. A person does not have to be dirty or poor to get lice. The closeness of children in child care in the home increases the potential for spread.

