

What are Head Lice?

Head lice are tiny wingless insects that live on the head and scalp of people, especially children. They are 1/16 to 1/8 inch in length which is about the size of a sesame seed and vary in color from tan to grey/white.



Picture is enlarged for visibility of head lice. Image courtesy of the National Pediculosis Association, www.headlice.org

Remember These Key Points:

- Anyone can get head lice
- Lice require blood to live
- Off the scalp, head lice rarely survive beyond two days
- Lice crawl very quickly
- Lice **do not** jump, fly or hop
- Lice is spread through direct contact, mainly head to head contact
- Sharing combs, brushes, hats, barrettes, etc. can also spread lice
- Pets **cannot** get or spread human head lice
- Lice is a nuisance but **not** a health hazard

What are Nits?

Nits are lice eggs that are very tiny and difficult to see. They vary in color from yellowish-brown to pearly white and are teardrop shaped.



Picture is enlarged for visibility of nits. Image courtesy of the National Pediculosis Association, www.headlice.org

Additional Key Details:

- Nits are firmly attached to the hair shaft close to the scalp, at the back of the head, and behind the ears with a waterproof glue-like substance
- The glue-like substance is so strong that the nits **cannot** be washed or flicked off with a fingernail
- Nits hatch in 7-10 days and become adult lice in 9-12 days
- As long as nits remain alive, head lice can be spread
- **Nits must be removed daily**

What are the Symptoms?

- Itching
- Tickling feeling of something crawling in the hair
- Scratch marks or red bite marks behind ears or back of the neck
- Irritability and sleeplessness because head lice are active at night

Steps to Treat Head Lice

1. Check every member of the family for live lice and nits.
2. Treat family members who have head lice with a lice-killing product. Products are available at stores that carry hair care products. Ask the pharmacist if you need help in choosing or locating a product.
3. It is important to **follow the label directions** on the product **EXACTLY**.
4. Remove all lice and nits with either a lice comb or by picking them out.
5. Check hair everyday for at least 14 days for any missed lice and nits and remove if present.
6. Repeat treatment **according to package directions**, usually in 7-10 days.
7. Remind individual **not to share** combs, hair barrettes, hats, scarves, helmets, or coats with other people.
8. If problems with lice persist, **call** your health care provider.

Steps to Clean the Home

1. Wash **all** pillows, bed sheets, stuffed animals, and clothing that the individual has used in hot water (at least 130 degrees).
2. Place items in the dryer at the hottest setting for at least 20 minutes.
3. Dry clean items that cannot be washed.
4. Place items that **cannot be cleaned or run through the dryer** (i.e. stuffed animals and toys) in a tightly sealed plastic bag for 10-14 days.
5. Wash **all** hair care items (combs, brushes, hair clips, etc.) in hot water (130 degrees) for 20 minutes.
6. Vacuum the **entire** house including rugs, furniture, floors, mattresses, and car including car seats to get rid of any hairs that may have viable nits attached.
7. After **all individuals** with head lice have been treated and the **entire** house has been cleaned, then bedding can be reapplied to the beds.
8. Sprays **should not** be used in the home. Sprays can be toxic. They are not safe for humans or the environment. Sprays can also be a trigger for individuals with breathing conditions such as asthma.

Resources

- Centers for Disease Control
<http://www.cdc.gov/lice/head/treatment.html>
- Harvard School of Public Health
<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html>
- National Pediculosis Association
www.headlice.org
- Tree of Life (image on front cover)
<http://tolweb.org/Anoplura/13871>

Head Lice: The Facts



Image courtesy of V. Smith, 1996



www.health.state.pa.us

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