



FACTS ABOUT HEAD LICE (Pediculosis)

What are head lice?

Head lice are very small, flat, wingless insects which are about the size of the head of a straight pin. Lice cannot fly and they do not jump, but they do crawl very quickly. They bite the scalp causing itching.

Lice lay eggs (nits) which are about the size of a sesame seed (-). The eggs (nits) vary in color from tan to reddish brown and attach themselves to the hair very close to the scalp. Nits hatch in 7-10 days.

How do you get head lice?

Anyone can get head lice from another person who has them, usually, through head-to-head contact. Lice are also spread by sharing combs, hair brushes, hats, caps or coats sometimes. Head lice are only found on humans. Animals *do not* get head lice. Many people believe that only persons who are unclean get lice. This is not true. Frequent bathing will neither prevent head lice nor eliminate head lice. Head lice must be treated with the proper medication before they will go away.

How can you tell if someone has head lice?

Carefully inspect the entire scalp and hair close to the scalp. Some persons will have an “itchy” scalp and frequently scratch their heads. Some persons will not be bothered at all by the head lice. This is why the hair and scalp must be examined closely and thoroughly.

Usually, a person will have 10-15 crawling (adult) lice which are difficult to see. The female adult lice lay 3-4 eggs per day and may live up to 30 days. These eggs (nits) are much easier to see. The eggs are attached to the hair close to the scalp with a cement-like substance. Nits appear as small, silvery oval shaped specks and are usually found around the back of the hairline of the neck, behind the ears, and the crown of the head. These eggs cannot be washed out or brushed out of the hair without first being treated with the proper medication.

How do head lice live? How long do head lice live?

Lice live on humans only. Once lice eggs (nits) are laid, it takes them about one week to hatch. They depend on human blood and the warmth of the scalp to survive. Lice cannot live off the human head for more than 2 days. Lice that may drop or crawl from a person’s head to carpet, furniture, or other objects are likely to die very soon.

What is the treatment to get rid of head lice?

Several nonprescription treatments are on the market to eliminate lice and their eggs. They can be purchased at your local pharmacy. There are also other treatments available which require a prescription. After buying the medication, carefully follow these directions:

1. Remove the person's clothing and have the person get in a bathtub or shower.
2. Read and follow carefully the directions on the treatment medication bottle.
3. After completing treatment, remove the dead lice and dead eggs (nits) with a stiff brush or fine tooth comb. Nit removal is very important since some of the nits are not killed by the shampoo treatment.
4. Have the person put on clean clothing after treatment to the hair and scalp.
5. Sheets/pillowcases, towels, and any worn clothing items which the person has been in contact with before the treatment should be washed and dried in a dryer. (Or dry cleaned if needed).
6. Clothing and bedding (like coats, pillows, stuffed animals, headphones, helmets etc.) which cannot be washed should be placed in plastic bags and sealed for 10 days to kill the lice or eggs which may be on these.
7. Combs, brushes and these types of items can be cleaned by soaking them for 5-10 minutes in hot water or one hour in the medications which are used to treat the hair.
8. Carpets, upholstered furniture, mattresses and even car seats can be cleaned by simple vacuuming. (Fumigating or using insecticide spray is not necessary and strongly discouraged as it may be harmful to family members and pets).
9. All family members and close friends of the person or child who has lice should be checked for head lice also. Those persons, who have any crawling lice or eggs (nits), should be treated in the same manner as soon as possible. All siblings or a parent who shares a bed with someone who has head lice should be treated even if there are no lice that can be seen.
10. The medication rapidly kills crawling lice, but sometimes does not kill all the eggs (nits). Removal of all nits is necessary to assure that your child will not continue to have head lice. Inspect your child frequently to assure that all eggs (nits) are removed. Although it can take time and sometimes be difficult to remove the nits, nit removal can be accomplished with a special fine tooth comb and your fingernails. Your child may need a second medication treatment in 7-10 days.
11. Discuss with your child the importance of not sharing brushes, combs, coats, hats, hair bows, etc.

If my child has lice, can he/she go to school?

A child with crawling lice should be removed from school as soon as possible after crawling lice are found. He/She should be treated at home the same day. After the treatment, it is alright for the child to return to school the next day.