

Head Lice

What are head lice?

Head lice are small parasitic insects that live on the scalp and neck hairs of people. The adult lice often are called cooties and their eggs are referred to as nits. Head lice evolved with along with their human hosts and will not feed on animals, just as the lice found on animals rarely feed on a person. They have been found on prehistoric mummies and implements, such as fine tooth combs, for removing head lice have been found in archeological excavations of ancient societies.

Children are more frequently infested than adults, and Caucasians are more frequently infested than persons of other ethnic/racial groups.

How do you get head lice?

The presence of head lice does not mean the person is "dirty", but simply that the individual has come into contact with someone else who had head lice.

Head lice are transmitted by direct head-to-head contact with an infested person's hair. They also may be transferred by sharing of combs, hats, and other hair adornments. For very short periods of time, the lice may be on bedding or upholstered furniture. Head lice cannot fly or jump.

Do head lice cause harm?

Head lice rarely cause direct harm, and they are not known to transmit any infectious diseases between people. The greatest harm associated with head lice results from the misuse of the shampoos or other chemicals used to kill head lice.

How do I know if my child or I have head lice?

Head lice feed on blood several times each day, about every 3-4 hours. They cannot survive for more than 24 hours at room temperature when the lice have left their human host's body. The piercing of the skin and the movement of lice over the surface of the scalp, tend to cause people to itch or feel like something is crawling on their head. In response, people scratch their head and, in severe cases, may even scratch open the skin.

There could be reasons other than head lice why a person's head might itch or feel "crawly." Therefore, it is important to check the person's head for crawling lice or nits.

How do I check someone's head for lice?

First of all, this must be done with good lighting and if a magnifying glass is available it should be used to make it easier to see the lice or nits. Use a comb or brush to remove any tangles in the hair.

Start by looking at the hair at the back of the neck and above the ears. You will be looking for crawling lice (they are brownish in color and may be on the scalp or in the hair) and nits (small, yellow-white, oval shaped objects firmly attached to the underside of the hair shafts, usually close to the scalp). There is generally less than a dozen crawling lice on an infested person's head, so more likely you will find nits rather than see the crawling lice. Be sure not to confuse nits with hair debris such as bright white irregularly shaped clumps of dandruff stuck to the hair shaft or elongated pieces of dandruff wrapped around the hair shaft which is easily removed; nits are not easily removed even by pulling.

I think my child has head lice now what do I do?

First, you need to shampoo their head with a pediculicide (a shampoo designed to kill head lice) AND be sure to follow the directions on the label. There are various brands of head lice shampoos. Most kill the crawling forms of the louse, but not the nits. Those brands listed as "ovicidal" usually contain the pesticide malathion and should kill the nits. All of the products, except NIX®, stop killing once the hair is rinsed with water. NIX® continues to kill crawling lice, particularly newly hatched lice for up to 14 days.

Second, be sure to follow the instructions of the shampoo you are using. You need to use the amount of shampoo required -- don't guess on how much to use. Do not use the shampoo any more frequently than the label says, usually 8-10 days between treatments. Some products recommend a second treatment and it is important you not ignore that step.

Third, you need to remove the nits from the hair after the shampoo treatment. The hair should be damp when you do this. Use a comb or brush to remove tangles from the hair. Divide the hair into sections and fasten off the hair that is not being worked on at the time. Use a fine-toothed nit comb and go through the section of hair from scalp to the end of the hair, working on the underside of the hair shaft. Dip the comb into a cup of water or use a paper towel to remove any lice, nits, or debris from the comb between passes. Dispose of the paper towels in a plastic bag that is sealed before going into the trash. Then search through the same section of hair and look for any attached nits. If nits are found and will not get out with the nit comb, you may have to pull them off with your fingernails or a tweezer, or cut the hair shaft. Repeat the process with all of the hair sections.

Even under the best of conditions, a few nits may be missed. Check your child every day for at least two weeks. Seeing a nit or two the next day does not necessarily mean reinfestation.

I have done this but my child still has lice?

There is some evidence that lice are developing resistance to certain shampoos. If you think that this is occurring, try a different head louse shampoo that has a different active chemical. If the problem persists, call the Health Department at 816-513-6152 for advice.

Do I have to spray my house?

There is no need to buy "lice" sprays for your home or car. Simply vacuum carpets and upholstered furniture at the same time you treat your child's hair and then dispose of the vacuum cleaner bag in the trash.

You should, however, take the bedding, clothing and towels used by your child and run them through a hot washer and dryer (the hot dryer is more important than the washer and should be done for at least 30 minutes). This should be done at the same time you are treating your child's hair. Items that cannot be laundered place in a sealed plastic bag for 10-14 days.

Combs and brushes used during the treatment of your child should be soaked in very hot (not boiling) water for 10 minutes or placed in a sealed plastic bag for 10-14 days.