

Fact Sheet

Head Lice

What are Head lice?

Head lice are tiny insects that live on the scalp, where they lay eggs. Head lice do not spread disease. Having head lice does not mean you are not clean.

How are Head lice spread?

Head lice spread easily, especially where people are in close contact. They are common among children in school or daycare. Having head lice once does not protect you from getting it again.

Head lice spread through direct hair-to-hair contact or indirectly by sharing things like hats, combs, hairbrushes and headphones. Head lice don't hop or fly, but they do crawl very quickly. Head lice that live on people cannot live on pets, such as dogs or cats.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

Some people with head lice do not have symptoms. Symptoms may include:

- An itchy scalp;
- A tickling feeling on the scalp or a sensation of something moving in the hair;
- Irritability and sleeplessness; and
- Sores on the head caused by scratching, which can become infected.

How do you know you have head lice?

Head lice are tiny, hard to see, and move around. The nits (eggs) are easier to see. Live nits are light-coloured and very small, about the size of a knot in a thread. Dead nits are found further down the hair shaft. Nits may look like dandruff, but they are hard to remove because they are sticky.

Examine a person's head if they show symptoms of head lice. First check the scalp and hairline at the back of the neck and behind the ears. Live lice or eggs may be easier to find in these areas. Next, part the hair into small sections and check the entire scalp and along the hairline, going from side to side with your fingers or a special head lice comb. Good lighting is important. If no lice or nits are found, repeat the above process again in 1 week. Check more often if there is an outbreak at your child's school or daycare or if someone else in the home has head lice.

What is the treatment?

Head lice will not go away without treatment. People with live (crawling) lice or nits within ¼ inch or less of the scalp should be treated. Treating everyone at the same time will help to prevent them from continuing to spread.

There are different products to treat lice. Follow the package directions carefully. Don't leave the shampoo or rinse on the hair longer than directed. Rinse over a sink, not in the bath or shower, so that other parts of the body don't come in contact with the treatment product.

On the day you start the treatment, wash all dirty clothes including hair ribbons, hats and scarves; bedding, towels, brushes and combs in hot water. Items that cannot be washed, such as pillows or stuffed animals, can be placed in a sealed plastic bag for 10 days or at freezing temperatures for 48 hours.

Can lice be prevented?

- Regularly checking your own and your child's hair is the best way to prevent spread. If one person in the household has head lice, check everyone who lives in the home and only treat those who have lice or nits.
- Remind people not to share personal items like hats, helmets, scarves, combs, hair accessories, hairbrushes or headphones.
- Children with head lice do not need to be sent home early from school; they can go home at the end of the day, be treated, and return to class after treatment has begun.
- Head lice do not survive for long once they are off the scalp. Head lice do not pose a risk to others through contact with furniture, pets or carpets so you do not have to do a major cleaning of the house or car.