

What You Should Know About Head Lice



COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CONTROL

What are head lice?

Head lice are small insects that live on people's heads. While they may be found anywhere on the head, they are usually found on the scalp, along the neckline and behind the ears. When lice bite the scalp, they cause itching, and sometimes redness.

Important things to remember about head lice:

- they do not cause or carry disease;
- they can be easily treated; and
- knowledge can help control their spread.

What do lice and their eggs look like?

Head lice are very small (usually about the size of a sesame seed), but size may vary. They move quickly, so they are difficult to spot. It is easier to look for their eggs (called nits) rather than the insects themselves.

Live nits can be grayish, cream or tan-coloured. Lice lay their nits on the hair very close to the scalp. They can be found anywhere on the head but most commonly behind the ears and at the back of the neck. Each nit is attached to the hair with a hard, waterproof "glue" so they cannot be washed out or brushed off like dandruff.



How can you tell if a person has head lice?

- Frequent scratching of the head
- Nits found stuck to the hair close to the scalp
- Small insects noticed on the head

What is the treatment for head lice?

- Check all household members.
- Treat all infested household members at the same time.

Children may return to school after the first treatment has been completed, and as many nits as possible removed.

- Use two treatments, seven days apart. There are several over-the-counter medicated shampoos or creme rinses that will get rid of the lice and nits such as R&C, Nix, SH-206, and Lindane. (Note: The second treatment of SH-206 should be applied 48 hours after the first treatment.) Before applying the lice shampoo, section the hair like corn rows, pouring a stream of the shampoo down each part. Follow package instructions carefully, using lots of shampoo, to ensure lice and nits are completely gone.
- If the initial treatment fails, a second treatment with a different product may be tried.

Treatment Procedure

- Use lice creme rinse or shampoo as directed on the label.
- Apply to wet or dry hair, following the directions for the product you are using.
- Work thoroughly into the hair, according to the directions on the label (usually 4-10 minutes).
- Rinse well with water to remove all creme rinse or shampoo and loosen the nits.

To Remove Nits

- Pull off individual nits by grasping nits between the finger tips and sliding off the end of hair strands.
- Place in bag and dispose.

OR

- Comb hair with a fine-toothed (nit) comb, one small section at a time.
- Position the comb as close as possible to the scalp and pull through to the end of the hair. Wipe nits from the comb frequently using tissues and dispose of tissues in a plastic or paper bag; seal and discard.
- When hair is dry, check the entire head for remaining nits and remove them. Continue checking (and removing) for the next 1-2 weeks.

Head lice products contain insecticide, which can be dangerous if not used correctly:

- Avoid getting the creme rinse or shampoo in the eyes or the mouth because it can cause irritation.
- These products should be applied to the scalp and hair only. To avoid getting the creme rinse or shampoo on other parts of the body, do not apply or rinse out while showering or bathing.
- They should not be applied to the head after taking a hot bath or shower.
- The person applying the creme rinse or shampoo should avoid unnecessary contact with it, since it can be absorbed through the skin. Breastfeeding or pregnant women should avoid contact by wearing rubber gloves during the procedure.
- **Ensure that all possible contacts are informed, so that other cases can be found and treated.** This may include calling the school principal, coach or day care staff; and/or the parents of your child's close playmates or team members.

Is any other cleaning necessary?

There is no evidence that a major household clean-up will help get rid of head lice. Head lice and their nits do not survive well off the scalp as they feed off humans and survive only in a certain temperature and humidity range.

Eggs will not hatch off the head. Lice rarely move from the scalp so it is unlikely they will spread through casual contact with furniture or carpeting.

The articles most likely to transmit lice are those that come into contact with the head and nape of the neck, such as hats, helmets, furry coat collars, scarves, hair brushes, combs and hair ornaments. Where possible, these items should be washed in hot water and dried in a dryer. Combs and brushes should be soaked in hot, soapy water for 15 minutes. Other items may be sealed in a plastic bag for 10 days, or placed in a freezer for 24 hours.

Who gets head lice?

Anyone can get head lice. Although parents are often embarrassed to find their children have head lice, it is really a common problem throughout society. It is most common in places where people work or play together for long periods of time, such as classrooms and day care centres.

How do you get head lice?

Contrary to popular belief, poor hygiene does not cause head lice. Head lice cannot jump or fly so they are most commonly spread through close head-to-head contact with someone who has head lice. Lice are also spread by sharing personal articles that have touched the head, such as hats, helmets, scarves, combs, brushes, barrettes and ribbons. They cannot be spread from animals or pets.

How can you prevent the spread of head lice?

Head lice can best be controlled through the co-operation of parents, teachers and public health personnel. Once parents learn how to recognize head lice, regular inspection of their children's scalps is the best preventive measure. Teach your children how head lice are spread and how to avoid them.

If you have any other questions, require further information or have difficulty getting rid of head lice, call your doctor or local public health office (see the municipal and provincial listings in the grey pages at the back of your telephone directory).

