

HEAD LICE !!! DON'T PANIC !!!

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Here is some helpful information on head lice. (It looks like a lot of complicated information but most is just common sense.)

First Don't Panic!

These little critters have been around for hundreds of thousands of years and are more of a nuisance than anything. They have even been found on prehistoric mummies!! There are different kinds of lice that live on different types of hair. They don't usually move from one type to another. For example human head lice would not like to live on your pet's hair and you can't catch lice from your pets.

What are Head Lice?

Head lice are tiny wingless parasitic insects that live on human hairs and feed on extremely small amounts of blood drawn from the scalp. They are 1/10 to 1/8 of an inch long and can be seen by the naked eye. Their six legs are very good at grasping the shaft of hair. They are about the size of a sesame seed. They are very common and usually a problem for children ages 3 to 12. They bite like mosquitoes, causing itching and scratching but they do not leave welts like mosquitoes. Lice and their eggs do not burrow into the scalp. They are not known to transmit

infectious organisms or disease, but scratching may cause skin irritation and even infection.

How does a head lice infestation spread?

Head Lice or pediculosis (*pediculus humanus capitis*) is very common in schools, childcare centers, sports activities and camps, but sleep-overs are a very common way lice are passed from home to home. Lice cannot jump, fly or hop and only rarely fall off a person's head. A "louse" can infest a new person (or host) by crawling from hair to hair. They can crawl very fast, at about nine inches per minute.

An adult female louse can lay about six eggs per day. Each louse lives about 32 days. Most lice can only live for about 12 hours away from the human body. Some literature states they can live up to 2 days off the scalp. They may be able to survive on hair caught in brushes and combs. Girls are more likely to get lice because they brush and style each other's hair. They are more likely to hug and dance together so their hair may touch.

Lice spread mainly through head to head contact but sharing clothing, bed linens, hats, combs and brushes, hair apparel and things held closely to the head such as pillows and plush toys, may be an indirect way to pass them along. Furniture, carpets and pets are not generally considered to be sources of lice infestation.

Head lice are not a sign of uncleanliness, they just like clean hair because it is easier to attach to. Lice do not favor any socio-economic class. In North America and Europe, they infest Caucasians more frequently than any other ethnic groups.

Signs of Head Lice

Head lice can be seen along with their eggs, called “nits.” The eggs look like tiny yellow, tan, or brown oval dots before they hatch. After they hatch, the shell of the egg looks white or clear. Lice lay the eggs close to the scalp, due to the warm temperature, and they hatch in 7 to 10 days. The egg to egg cycle lasts about three weeks. **Eggs do not wash out of the hair.**

Scratching is a clue to lice, but it depends upon how sensitive a person’s head is to the lice biting. Lice suck blood from the host and feed every hour and a half. This is what causes the itching. It may sometimes take weeks for a child to start scratching. They may feel the “tickling” of something on their head. When lice are found, they have probably been around for about a month.

Small red bumps, sores, or a rash may develop from scratching, and could lead to a bacterial infection. Possible signs of infection would be skin that is red and tender that may have crusting and oozing along with swollen lymph glands. A doctor could treat this with an oral antibiotic.

You can check your child’s head for nits or lice by parting the hair into sections and checking for them on the scalp, behind the ears, and around the nape of the neck. You may use a bright light and a magnifying glass.

Call your child’s doctor if they are constantly scratching or complains of an itchy scalp that won’t go away. The doctor can give advice on lice and the treatment.

Also check with the school or child care center to see if others have recently had lice and **let them know that your child has them, so that others are alert and have an awareness to help in prevention and teaching.**

How do I treat head lice?

One of the biggest problems in getting rid of head lice is the **parent's discomfort** in talking about the problem to other parents or friends. Please know that they are a common problem and that most parents have or will deal with them at some point in their life!

If you find lice, **treat simultaneously** only those in the **family** with them, but do inspect everyone in the home. Do this throughout the school year **about every two weeks.**

Most schools **do not have** "No nit" policies, as this does not seem to prevent the spread of lice and helps to keep students from missing school. **School wide head checks are generally not done.** Making parents aware and teaching them about lice is the best way to get rid of them.

There are many web sites on lice and how to get rid of them but some of these sites are only promoting their products. Pay attention to who the sites are and where their research is from. (American Academy of Pediatrics, Centers for Disease Control or Health Departments are good sites.)

Because of the overuse of shampoos, lice have become resistant to some of the **shampoos.** No lice product is 100% effective. Many shampoos are pesticides and should not be **overused** as they can be absorbed through the skin and may be toxic. **Always follow directions properly and consult your physician if problems persist.**

Here's what you can do:

- Treatment should be considered only when live lice or viable eggs are observed. Sometimes dandruff, hairspray droplets, scabs, dirt or other insects could be mistaken for lice. (Eggs more than a half an inch away from the scalp, are nearly always hatched and may not mean an active infection.) Your doctor or school nurse may recommend a medicated shampoo, crème rinse or lotion. These may be over-the-counter or doctor prescribed, depending on what treatments have already been tried. Follow directions exactly because most of these are **pesticides**. Usually the shampoos are pyrethrins or permethrin. Sometimes the lice are resistant and you may have to change shampoos. After shampooing, lice may be killed but the itching may continue for a few days.
- The discovery of lice on a **child does not mean the child is to be sent home or isolated**. Consider it one of life's learning experiences! Focus on education and treatment and not on blaming anyone.
- The most important thing to do is to **get rid of the live lice and the nits**, using a special "nit" comb. **If you do not use a medicated shampoo, use a conditioner once a week to comb out nits and lice**. This is a cost effective way to stop head lice from reestablishing themselves. Use a conditioner on dry/or wet hair and

cover from root to tip and separate the hair into sections. Sit your child down in front of the TV, video or a book, as this can take quite some time. Use a fine tooth comb to look for live lice and nits. If you find live lice **you should treat** with a special shampoo, but the conditioner is a starting option, **instead of shampooing with over-the-counter pesticide shampoos. Don't use a cream rinse or shampoo/conditioner combination before applying lice medicated shampoos.** Wet or conditioned hair makes it easier to get a comb through. Wipe the comb off each time you pull through the hair, starting at the scalp working to the end of the strands. Examine the comb for lice and nits. The nits come off by pulling off all the way to the end of the hair. (Though petroleum jelly, mayonnaise, or olive oil are sometimes used to suffocate head lice, these treatments have not been proven to be effective.)

- Should you use a **pesticide shampoo**, follow the directions **exactly** and do nit removal following. **A second shampooing is needed in about 7 to 10 days to kill all of the newly hatched nits. Do not use medicated lice treatments on children under the age of two. Please consult your physician.**
- You may wash all bed linens and articles of clothing that's been recently worn by anyone in the home that has been infested in very hot water (130 degrees Fahrenheit, 54.4 degrees Celcius), then put them in the hot cycle of the **dryer for at least 20 minutes.**
- Dry clean clothes that are not washable.

- Stuffed animals, toys and articles that cannot be washed can be put in a labeled air tight bag for 2 weeks.
- Vacuum carpets and upholstered furniture in your home or car. **Insecticides are not recommended.** (Also there is no need for any type of hair repellant for lice.)
- Soak hair care products, combs, barrettes, head bands etc. in rubbing alcohol or medicated shampoo for 1 hour. You can also wash them in hot water each day or throw them away.
- Teach your children not to share combs, hair apparel, pillows, wigs, brushes etc., and to avoid head to head contact. Explain to them, in an age appropriate way, what lice are, and that they can be rid of easily with the proper care.
- The use of antibiotics for persistent cases of lice is often opposed due to the fact of the spread of bacterial resistance and diminishing the usefulness of the antibiotic for fighting life-threatening infections. Discuss this with your doctor.
- Good Luck! And be patient and diligent.

Here's what NOT to do!!

- Don't use a hot hair dryer on your child's hair after applying any of the currently available scalp treatments because some contain flammable ingredients.

- **Don't use a cream rinse or shampoo/conditioner combination before applying lice medication or shampoo. You may do this a couple days after or between the next medicated shampooing.**
- **Don't wash your child's hair for 1 to 2 days after using a medicated treatment.**
- Don't use sprays or a pest control company to get rid of lice as they can be harmful.
- Don't use the same shampoo more than three times on one person. If it is not working call your doctor.
- Don't use more than one head lice medication at a time.
- **Don't use kerosene** as it does not work and is very dangerous. The vapors can be inhaled and it is highly flammable.
- Shaving the head or cutting the hair makes it easier to take care of the hair, but will not affect how easily a child catches lice. Consider the child's self-esteem and wishes for any such decision.

For more information and/or my references:

Contact your school nurse or doctor. They will not judge you or tell others if you ask for assistance.

Harvard School of Public Health
Richard J. Pollack, Ph.D., Anthony Kiszewski, D.Sc.,
Andrew Spielman Sc.D., Laboratory of Public Health
Entomology

Or

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html>

Centers for Disease Control

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/headlice/factsht_head_lice_treating.htm

Virginia School Health Guidelines, Va Department of Health, 2nd Edition, May 1999

<http://kidshealth.org/parent/infections/common/lice.html>

21 Surprising Things You Might Not Know About Head Lice by Gerri Harvey, RN, M.Ed.

<http://www.snp.homestead.com/lice21.html>

American Academy of Pediatrics

<http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/pediatrics;110/3/638.pdf>

James Cook University, North Queensland, Australia, Head Lice Information Sheet, Assoc. Prof. Rick Speare, email: richard.speare@jcu.edu.au

The Winchester Star, November 15, 2008, The Mini Page, Little Pest, Big Problem - Staying Ahead of Lice, Betty Debnam-Founding Editor and Editor at Large

