

# Head Lice

Head lice are usually spread from one person to another through direct contact. While upsetting for parents, it is not a sign that the child is sick or dirty. Lice are common with studies showing up to 1 in 4 elementary school children are infested. Lice do not jump or fly, humans are the only hosts and while lice can live for up to 50 hours on objects such as clothes or brushes, it is unclear from studies if these objects are involved in transmission. It is important to find and treat lice quickly to avoid spreading them to others.

Most people with head lice do not have any symptoms. Some people feel itching or skin irritation of the scalp, neck, and ears. This is caused by an allergic reaction to lice saliva. It can take up to 6 weeks to develop a reaction to lice saliva.

## DIAGNOSIS

Head lice are diagnosed by examination of the scalp and hair. The louse is tiny, measuring 2-3 mm when fully mature, grayish white and very difficult to see with the naked eye. The eggs, also known as nits, are easier to see. They are white, look like dandruff and are firmly attached to the hair. Typically hatching after 10 days, they move further from the shaft as the hair grows.

A fine-toothed comb is usually needed to make the diagnosis. Hair can be wet or dry and should be combed through to remove tangles. The fine-toothed comb is pulled from the roots to ends and then examined after each stroke for lice or eggs. Repeat at least once. Finding nits without lice is not necessarily a sign of infestation as they can persist for months after treatment. The closer the nits are to the scalp, the more likely there is active infection.

## TREATMENT

A number of options are available. One of the commonest non-prescription medications is Permethrin, better known as Nix or Rid. Follow the manufacturer's instructions carefully for applying the insecticide. Typically, you wash the hair with shampoo, rinse it, and towel-dry it. Apply the insecticide cream or gel liberally to the scalp and leave on for 10 minutes before rinsing with water. A second treatment is normally required 7-10 days later.

Wet-combing is a way to remove lice from the hair with careful and repeated combing. It is a good option for treating very young children or if you want to avoid using insecticides. Wet-combing is time-consuming and must be repeated multiple times over a period of a few weeks. The technique is the same as that used in the diagnosis of head lice. Each session should take 15-30 minutes, and should be done every 3-4 days for 2 weeks after you no longer find an adult louse.

Studies have examined lotions and other materials (olive oil, butter, mayonnaise, petroleum jelly [Vaseline]) that are applied to the head, and then allowed to dry, with the goal of suffocating lice. However, lice are difficult to suffocate; wet-combing probably works as well and is less messy. Close contacts should be examined for lice and those who share the same bed should be treated, even if no lice or eggs are found.

Children should not be removed from school, but it is recommended that the school be informed.

Clothing, bedding, and towels used within 48 hours before treatment should be washed in hot water and dried in an electric dryer on the hot setting. Dry cleaning is also effective. You can use a vacuum to clean furniture, carpet, and car seats. Items that cannot be washed or vacuumed can be sealed inside a plastic bag for two weeks. Items that the person used more than two days before treatment are not likely to be infested because head lice cannot survive off the body for more than 48 hours. You do not need to have your home sprayed for lice.