



Head Lice

Head lice are an unpleasant fact of life that affect people all over the world. If you have a child, chances are that you will one day have to deal with head lice. Here are some tips for treating and preventing head lice with a minimum of stress.

What are head lice?

Head lice (scientific name is *Pediculus capitis*) are tiny insects about the size of a sesame seed. They live on the heads of humans and feed on their blood. They have six legs, but no wings. They cannot fly or jump, but they do crawl very fast. They cannot survive off the human head for more than 48 hours. The only way you can get head lice is from another person who has them.

Once they are old enough, female head lice lay eggs called *nits*. They are about the same size as a flake of dandruff. Nits are always attached to individual strands of hair, close to the scalp. Lice use a substance like glue to attach the nits, which makes them hard to remove. You may never see a louse, but you will see nits. They are cream in colour and about the size of this • dot or tip of a pencil. Dandruff is about the same size but it is easy to remove; nits are not.

Head lice spread from person to person very easily. The way most head lice spread is from one head touching another.

Head lice spreads by...

- **Close contact**

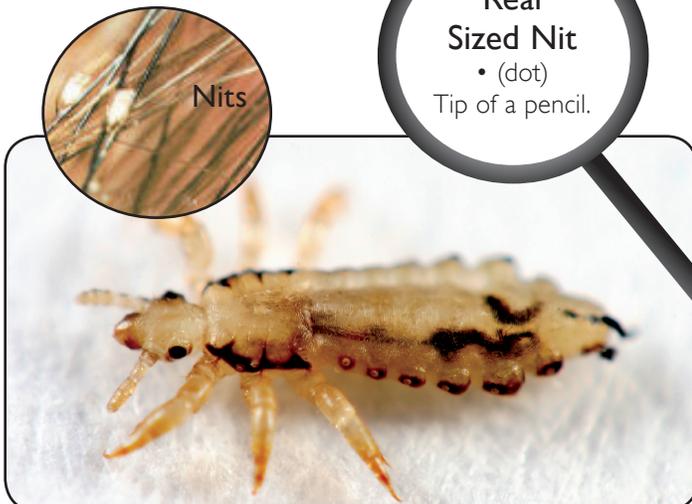
When heads touch during hugs, sharing secrets, play wrestling, working together.

- **Shared objects**

Combs, brushes, hats.

Real Sized Nit

- (dot)
- Tip of a pencil.



How do I know it's head lice?

Symptoms are:

- Tickling feeling in the hair.
- Frequent itching.
- Sores from scratching.

However, you may only know about head lice when you or someone else finds nits in the hair. Look for them regularly at the nape of the neck and behind the ears.

Treating head lice

There are four steps to treating head lice:

1. *Treat the person affected with a product that kills live lice.*

There are many such products on the market. Only those that state they kill lice actually do so. Do not use regular shampoo, cream rinse or any other rinse on the head for 48 hours after shampooing with head lice shampoo. This de-activates the lice product.

2. *Remove all the nits.*

Using a bright light (daylight or a crafter's light are ideal), go through your child's hair carefully. Pick up one small strand at a time and pull off the nit with your fingernails.

3. *After a week, treat the head again.*

Just in case you missed some nits, treat the head again about seven to 10 days after the first treatment. Any nits that remain will have hatched by then, but the lice will still be young.

Treat the household

You should also wash the clothing and bedding used in the last two days by the affected person. Don't forget stuffed animals! Wash in hot water and dry in a hot dryer.

For items that cannot be washed, you have three options:

- » Dry clean.
- » Put them in a sealed bag for **two** weeks.
- » Put them in a deep freezer for several days.

- Vacuum your child's car seat or booster seat.
- Disinfect combs, brushes, hair clips, headbands, etc. by washing in very hot water with soap.
- Vacuum chairs and couches that the affected person has used recently. **Do not** use chemical sprays.
- Check **everyone** who shares the home for nits.
- Head lice products contain insecticide. They should be used exactly as directed and no more frequently than every seven days. The product may say it killed nits as well, but it won't kill all of them. Removing the nits is essential.
- To make nit removal easier, try sitting your child in front of a TV program, movie, etc.
- Nit combs can be useful. The metal ones are much better than the plastic ones. Regular combs are not fine enough.

Preventing head lice

- Teach children that head lice spread by direct contact. They should keep a little distance from other heads.
- Teach children to **never** share combs, brushes, barrettes or anything else they use for their hair.
- Teach children to **never** share hats, caps, scarves.
- Keep longer hair in barrettes, pony tails, buns or braids.
- Consider adding tea tree oil to your shampoo. This method is not proven, but some people have had success with it.
- Start a head lice patrol in your home: regularly examine each child's head closely for signs of infestation; once a week is about right.



“Head to head makes the head lice spread”

Call the Doctor if...

- Your child is under two years old.
- You find lice or nits on your eyebrows or eyelashes or beard.
- The skin of the scalp is broken or infected.
- You are pregnant or breastfeeding. In either case, you could also contact Motherisk at 416-813-6780.
- You have allergies, especially to ragweed, chrysanthemums, natural or synthetic pyrethrins; some head lice products are chemically similar to these and may cause an allergic reaction.

Myth-Busters

- Head lice can't jump or fly. They do crawl very fast.
- Head lice don't live on cats, dogs or other pets. They only live on humans.
- Head lice don't prefer clean hair. They love hair of any kind.
- Head lice can only live about 48 hours away from a human head.
- Home remedies are **not** effective for killing lice.
- Remedies for pets have even more insecticide than human head lice products; they are **NOT** safe.
- Head lice products are **not** safe for constant or repeated use.

References:

Pollack, R.J. *Head Lice: Information And Frequently Asked Questions*. Harvard School of Public Health, 2007 www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html.

Treating Head Lice Infestation. Centers for Disease Control, 2005. http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/lice/factsheet_head_lice_treating.htm.

For more information call the Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit and speak to a Public Health Nurse.



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