

# Head Lice

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## **What is pediculosis (head lice)?**

Pediculosis is an infestation of head lice on the hair of the head. The lice feed on human blood which can cause severe local itching.

## **Who gets pediculosis?**

Anyone may become infested with head lice, regardless of age, sex, race, or standards of personal hygiene. Head lice are frequently found in schools and day care centers, and are easily spread from person-to-person.

## **How are head lice spread?**

Head lice are spread through direct head-to-head contact with an infested person or indirect contact with lice-carrying objects such as combs, brushes, hats or scarves. Since nits (louse eggs) must be laid by adult lice, the chances of nits being spread from person-to-person are minimal.

## **Do animals spread head lice?**

No. Lice from animals do not infest humans.

## **What do head lice look like?**

There are three forms of lice: the nit, the nymph, and the adult.

**Nit:** Nits are head lice eggs. They are hard to see and are often confused for dandruff or hair spray droplets. Nits are found firmly attached to the hair shaft. They are oval and usually yellow to white. Nits take about one week to hatch.

**Nymph:** The nit hatches into a baby louse called a nymph. It looks like an adult head louse, but is smaller. Nymphs mature into adults about 7 days after hatching. To live, the nymph must feed on blood.

**Adult:** The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs, and is tan to greyish-white. In persons with dark hair, the adult louse will look darker. Females lay nits; they are usually larger than males. Adult lice can live up to 30 days on a person's head. To live, adult lice need to feed on blood. If the louse falls off a person, it dies within 2 days.

### **How did my child get head lice?**

- ▶ By contact with an already infested person. Contact is common during play at school and at home (slumber parties, sports activities, at camp, on a playground).
- ▶ By wearing infested clothing, such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, or hair ribbons.
- ▶ By using infested combs, brushes, or towels.
- ▶ By lying on a bed, couch, pillow, carpet, or stuffed animal that has recently been in contact with an infested person.

### **Where are head lice most commonly found?**

On the scalp behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the neck. Head lice hold on to hair with hook-like claws found at the end of each of their six legs. Head lice are rarely found on the body, eyelashes, or eyebrows.

### **What are the signs and symptoms of head lice infestation?**

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, caused by the allergic reaction to the bites.
- Irritability.
- Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected.
- Head lice do not carry or spread disease.

### **How soon do symptoms appear?**

It may take two to three weeks for a person to notice the intense itching associated with pediculosis.

### **How long is a person able to spread head lice?**

Lice can be spread as long as they remain alive on the infested person or their clothing.

### **How long do head lice live away from the body?**

Unattached to the body and without a blood meal, head lice survive for approximately 6-24 hours (averaging about 12-15 hours).

## **TREATMENT of HEAD LICE**

1. **R<sub>x</sub>** - is the recommended treatment.
2. Alternative - olive oil.



**NEVER USE GASOLINE OR KEROSENE to treat head lice.**

## **Step One: Treat the Infested Person / Any Infested Family Members**

Requires using an OTC or prescription medication. Follow these treatment steps:

1. Before applying treatment, remove all clothing from the waist up.
2. Apply lice medicine, also called pediculicide (peh-DICK-you-luh-side), according to label instructions. If the infested person has extra long hair, you may need to use a second bottle. (Note: Using a hair dryer, to dry hair after shampooing, may also help with killing lice.)

**WARNING:** Do not use a creme rinse or combination shampoo/conditioner before using lice medications. Do not re-wash hair for 1-2 days after treatment.

3. Have the infested person put on clean clothing after treatment.
4. If some live lice are still found 8-12 hours after treatment, but are moving more slowly than before, do not retreat. Comb dead and remaining live lice out of the hair. The medicine sometimes takes longer to kill the lice.
5. If no dead lice are found 8-12 hours after treatment and lice seem as active as before, the medicine may not be working. See your health care provider for a different medication and follow their treatment instructions.
6. A nit comb should be used to remove nits and lice from the hair shaft. Many flea combs made for cats and dogs are also effective. Finer-toothed nit combs, available at most pharmacies or through the National Pediculosis Association\*, may also be helpful.
7. After treatment, check hair daily and use a nit comb or pull out nits and any live lice you see.
8. Retreat in 7-10 days with the same product.
9. Continue to check all treated persons daily, for three weeks after you think all lice and nits are gone.

## **Step Two: Treat the Household**

1. To kill lice and nits, machine wash all washable clothing and bed linens that the infested person touched during the two days before treatment. Use the hot water cycle (130°F) to wash clothes. Dry laundry using the hot cycle for at least 20 minutes.
2. Dry-clean clothing that is not washable (coats, hats, scarves, pillows, etc.) OR place articles in the dryer on high heat for 30 minutes.
3. Store all clothing, stuffed animals, comforters, etc., that cannot be washed or dry cleaned into a plastic bag and seal for two weeks.
4. Soak combs and brushes for one hour in rubbing alcohol, Lysol\*, or wash with soap and hot (130°F) water.
5. Vacuum the floor and furniture. Do not use fumigant sprays; they can be toxic if inhaled.

## REASONS WHY MEDICATIONS MAY SEEM NOT TO WORK

- 1. Misdiagnosis of a head lice infestation.** A person has head lice if they have crawling bugs on their head or many lice eggs (also called nits) within a quarter inch (approximately the width of your pinky finger) of the scalp. Nits found on the hair shaft further than a  $\frac{1}{4}$  -  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch from the scalp have already hatched out. If previously treated, treatment is not recommended for people who only have nits further than one-quarter inch away from the scalp.
- 2. Not following treatment instructions fully.** See instructions below for how to treat a head lice infestation. Using medication alone is not likely to cure a head lice infestation.
- 3. Medication not working at all (resistance).** If head lice medication does not kill any crawling bugs, then resistance is likely. If the medication kills some of the bugs, then resistance to medication is probably not the reason for treatment failure (see item #2 and #4).
- 4. Medication kills crawling bugs, but is not able to penetrate the nits.** It is very difficult for head lice medication to penetrate the nit shell. Medication may effectively kill crawling bugs, but may not treat the nits. This is why follow-up treatment is recommended. See instructions below for a detailed summary.
- 5. New infection.** You can get infested more than once with head lice. Teach family members how to prevent re-infection.



**My child is under 2 years old and has been diagnosed with head lice. Can I treat him or her with prescription or OTC drugs?**

No. For children under 2 years old, remove crawling bugs and nits by hand. If the problem persists, consult your pediatrician.

**When treating head lice:**

1. Do not use extra amounts of the lice medication unless instructed. Lice shampoos/creme rinses are insecticides and can be dangerous when misused or overused.
2. Do not treat the infested person more than three times with the same medication if it does not seem to work. See your health care provider for alternative treatments.
3. Use the same product for two consecutive treatments.

**Should household sprays be used to kill adult lice?**

No. Spraying the house is NOT recommended. Fumigants and room sprays can be toxic if inhaled.

**Should I have a pest control company spray my house?**

No. Vacuuming floors and furniture is enough to treat the household.

\*Information in this Fact Sheet has been provided / secured from:  
The National Pediculosis Association, Inc. [www.headlice.org](http://www.headlice.org)  
Wisconsin Division of Public Health and CDC - Division of Parasitic Diseases [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)