



Head Lice

What is head lice?

The head louse, or *Pediculus humanus capitis*, is a parasitic insect that can be found on the head, eyebrows, and eyelashes of people. Head lice feed on human blood several times a day and live close to the human scalp. Head lice are not known to spread disease.

What do head lice look like?

Head lice have three forms: the egg (also called a nit), the nymph, and the adult.

Egg/Nit: Nits are lice eggs laid by the adult female head louse at the base of the hair shaft nearest the scalp. Nits are firmly attached to the hair shaft, are oval-shaped, very small (about the size of a knot in thread), are yellow/white, and hard to see.

Nymph: A nymph is an immature louse that hatches from the nit. A nymph looks like an adult head louse, but is smaller.

Adult: The fully grown and developed adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs, and is tan to grayish-white in color. Adult head lice may look darker in persons with dark hair than in persons with light hair.

How is it spread?

Head-to-head contact with an already infested person is the most common way to get head lice. Head-to-head contact is common during play at school, at home, and elsewhere (sports activities, playground, slumber parties, camp).

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of the head louse.

- Irritability and difficulty sleeping; head lice are most active in the dark.
- Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected with bacteria found on the person's skin.

Should a person with head lice be isolated?

Exclude until condition is resolved.

If no nymphs or adult lice are seen, and the only nits found are more than ¼ inch from the scalp, then the infestation is probably old and no longer active — and does not need to be treated.

What type of treatment and care should be given?

All infested persons (household members and close contacts) and their bedmates should be treated at the same time. Over-the-counter (OTC) or prescription medications are required to treat head lice. Some pediculicides (medicines that kill lice) have an ovicidal effect (kill eggs).

Hats, scarves, pillow cases, bedding, clothing, and towels worn or used by the infested person in the 2-day period just before treatment is started can be machine washed and dried using the hot water and hot air cycles. Items that cannot be laundered may be dry-cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag for two weeks. Items such as hats, grooming aids, and towels that come in contact with the hair of an infested person should not be shared. Vacuuming furniture and floors can remove an infested person's hairs that might have viable nits attached.

Adapted from:
“Head Lice.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013 (<http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/>, accessed 6 May 2014)