

HEAD LICE FACT SHEET

What are head lice?

Head lice are parasitic insects that can be found on the head, eyebrows, and eyelashes. The word “louse” is used to refer to a single (one) head lice parasite (*pediculus humanus capitis*). Head lice do not spread disease. Lice appear in three different forms:

- Nit: Nits are lice eggs laid at the base of hair shaft nearest to the scalp. They often appear yellow or white. Head lice usually take 8–9 days to hatch.
- Nymph: A nymph is an immature louse that is smaller than a mature adult.
- Adult: A fully grown head louse is about the size of a sesame seed, and tan to grayish-white in color, although it may look darker in persons with dark hair. Adult head lice live about 30 days, but die in 1–2 days if they fall off a person’s head.

Who can get head lice?

Anyone. However, head lice most commonly affect pre-school children attending day care, elementary school children, and the household members of affected children. Head lice are less common among African-Americans compared to persons of other races.

What are signs and symptoms of head lice?

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, due to an allergic reaction to bites of the louse.
- Irritability and difficulty sleeping; head lice are most active in the dark.
- Sores on the head caused by scratching.

Head lice and head lice nits are commonly found around and behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the head.

How soon do symptoms appear?

It may take 4-6 weeks for itching to appear the first time someone has head lice.

How are head lice spread?

The spread of head lice is not related to a person’s cleanliness or the cleanliness of one’s environment. Head lice are most commonly spread when an uninfested person’s hair touches the hair of a person with lice.

How are head lice diagnosed?

Head lice are best diagnosed by a health care provider. The diagnosis is made when a live nymph or adult louse is found on a person’s scalp or hair. Nymphs and adult lice may be difficult to find because they are very small, move quickly, and avoid light. Using a magnifying lens and a fine-toothed comb may be helpful to find live lice.

How are head lice treated?

Lice can be treated with an over-the-counter or prescription medication. All household members and close contacts of the person with lice should be treated at the same time. If treatment fails, please consult your health care provider. Make sure to follow your health care provider’s recommendations and guidelines.

How can people protect themselves against head lice?

- Avoid head-to-head (hair-to-hair) contact during play and activities (such as while at school, home, or during sports activities).
- Avoid sharing clothing such as hats, scarves, hair ribbons or barrettes, sports uniforms, or coats.
- Avoid sharing combs, brushes or towels – these items can be disinfected by soaking them in hot water for 5-10 minutes.
- Do not lie on beds, couches, pillows, carpets, or stuffed animals recently used by an infested person.
- Machine wash and dry clothing, bed linens and other items used by infested person during the 2 days before treatment using hot water. Dry clean non-washable items or seal them in a plastic bag and store them for 2 weeks.

Should a person with head lice stay at home from school/daycare?

A child with head lice does not need to be sent home early from school. The child should be treated and can return to school the day after treatment has begun. Children in daycare should follow their center’s policies.

Where can I get more information?

Information about head lice and other related health topics can be found at www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please www.dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-9371.

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