

Head Lice FAQ



Did you know that as many as 6 million to 12 million people worldwide get head lice every year, and cleanliness has nothing to do with who will be the targets of the blood-sucking insects.

Head lice are a common problem that typically affects school-aged children *and* their families. They can attach to the hair of anyone's head, and it doesn't matter how clean, dirty, rich, or poor the place/person is. Though head lice may be a nuisance, they do **NOT** cause serious illness or carry any disease.

Head lice are tiny bugs about the size of a sesame seed. Their bodies are usually pale and gray, but their color may vary. One of these tiny bugs is called a louse.

Lice lay and attach their eggs to a hair strand close to the scalp using a sticky substance that holds them firmly in place. The eggs and their shell casings are called nits. Nits are oval and the sizes of a knot of thread that blends in with the hair. After the eggs hatch, the empty nits stay on the hair shaft.

Head lice live about 28 days and develop in three phases:

Egg or nit ~ Eggs/nits hatch in 6 to 9 days. Eggs are usually found within 4 to 6 mm of the scalp and do not survive if they are farther away.

Nymph~The nymph looks like an adult head louse but is much smaller Nymphs become adults about 7 days after hatching.

Adult louse ~ An adult louse multiplies fast and lay up to 10 eggs a day. It takes only about 12 to 14 days for newly hatched eggs to reach adulthood. This cycle can repeat itself every 3 weeks if head lice are left untreated.

Head lice move by crawling; they cannot hop or fly. They are spread by close, prolonged **head-to-head** contact with the hair of an infested person. Spread by contact with clothing (such as hats, scarves, coats) or other personal items (such as combs, brushes, or towels) used by an infested person is **uncommon**. Head lice feed specifically on human blood (not animal blood) and don't stray far from their food source. They're not going to strike out on expeditions to find new heads. When away from a person they're going to die within 24 hours, because they must have human blood

Control of head lice depends on prompt diagnosis, effective treatment and teamwork! Your help in inspecting your child frequently throughout the school year for the presence of head lice would be greatly appreciated.

- Seat your child in a brightly lit room.
- Part the hair and look for crawling lice/nits the scalp a section at a time. Live lice are hard to find. They avoid light and move quickly.
- Nits will look like small white/yellow/brown specks and be firmly attached to the hair near the scalp. The easiest place to find them is at the hairline at the back of the neck or behind the ears. Nits can be confused with many other things such as dandruff, dirt particles, or hair spray droplets. The way to tell the difference is that nits are firmly attached to hair, while dandruff, dirt, or other particles are not.
- Use a fine-tooth comb to help you search the scalp section by section
- Notify your student's school health room if lice are found or if you have any questions or concerns regarding lice and your student

The most effective way to treat head lice is with head lice medicine followed by the comb out method every 2-3 days for 2-3 weeks.

- Choose a product that contains *Permethrin*. Over-the-counter treatments contain 1% permethrin. Anything higher than 1% must be obtained from your healthcare provider.
- After each treatment and then daily, use comb-out method to remove nits and eggs.
- Follow the directions on the package exactly as written.
- Never let children apply the medicine. Medicine should be applied by an adult.
- Do not use medicine on a child 2 years or younger without first checking with your child's health care provider
- Never place a plastic bag on a child's head.
- Do not leave a child alone with medicine in his or her hair.
- Repeat the treatment in 7 - 9 days after the first treatment (according to manufacturer's recommendations)
- Contact your student's healthcare provider if lice remain following 2 treatments of recommended shampoo.

In order to avoid a recurrence the environment must also be treated

- Wash your student's clothes/ towels/ bed linens/hats in hot water and dry on high heat if they were used within 2 days before head lice were found and treated.
- You do not need to throw these items away. Items that cannot be washed may be dry-cleaned or vacuumed.
- Vacuum all furniture/mattresses.
- Do not spray pesticides in your home.
- All household members and close contacts should also be checked and treated if necessary.
- **NEVER** use a lice treatment if live lice are not seen, unless you are using a product stating it is ovicidal (eliminates nits). **MOST PRODUCTS ARE NOT OVICIDAL.**