

Preventing Head Lice

What is Head Lice?

Head lice are small insects that can cause severe itching. They feed on blood and lay eggs that attach to the hair. They easily spread from one person to another, especially children in schools and child care facilities.

Head lice do not transmit disease.

- Anyone can get lice, regardless of hygiene or cleanliness.
- Lice are white and about the size of a sesame seed.
- Lice move by crawling. They cannot hop or fly.
- Lice eggs are called nits. Lice glue the nits to hair about 1/4 of an inch from the scalp.
- Nits are hard to kill and must be physically removed from hair with a nit comb.

How do people get head lice?

Lice can get onto your hair when you come in close contact with an infested person's hair or something their hair has touched like clothing, brushes, combs, hair accessories, hats, carpets, pillows, toys, upholstery, car seats, and furniture. Direct head-to-head contact with someone who has an active infestation is the most likely way to get lice.



What are the signs of head lice?

- Itching is the most common symptom of lice.
- A tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Difficulty sleeping or irritability. Lice are active in the dark.
- Sores on the head from scratching.

How do I know if I have lice?

The only way to tell if someone has lice is to find lice or nits in the hair. Lice and nits are usually found on hair near the scalp, behind ears and at the nape of the neck. Adult lice are small, move quickly, and avoid light. This can make them very hard to find.

- Use of a fine-toothed comb and/or a magnifying glass can be helpful in finding lice.
- Dandruff and hair spray droplets are often mistaken for nits.

How is head lice prevented?

- Avoid head-to-head (hair-to-hair) contact during school, play, sports, slumber parties, or other events.

- Do not share clothing such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, hair ribbons, or barrettes.
- Do not share combs, brushes, or towels.
- Do not lie on beds, couches, pillows, carpets, or stuffed animals that have recently been in contact with an infested person.

How do I remove lice from objects in the home?

Head lice can only survive 1-2 days if they fall off a person and cannot feed. You don't need to spend a lot of time or money on house cleaning activities. The following can help:

- Items can be washed in hot water (at least 130°F), dried in a hot dryer for at least 40 minutes, ironed with a hot iron, dry cleaned or boiled for at least five minutes.
- Seal non-washable items, like stuffed animals or pillows, in a plastic bag for two weeks. The lice and nits will starve and die.
- Vacuum carpets and upholstery in your home and car. Especially places where an infested person has slept or sat.
- Soak combs and brushes in hot water (at least 130°F) for 5-10 minutes.
- Do **not** use fumigant sprays or fogs. They can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.

(over)

Who should be treated for head lice?

- All people with evidence of an active infestation.
- Other people in the home and close contacts should be checked for lice infestation.
- All people with active lice infestation should be treated at the same time.

How do you treat lice?

Effective treatment requires using an over-the-counter or prescription medication, often in shampoo form.

- Apply lice medicine, called pediculicide, according to the instructions. Pay attention to how long the medication should be left on the hair and how it should be washed out.
- **Carefully follow all instructions.**
- Do not use a combination shampoo/conditioner or conditioner before using lice medication.
- Do NOT re-wash hair for 1–2 days after lice medicine is removed
- Two bottles of medication may be needed for long hair.
- Have the infested person put on clean clothing after treatment.



After the first treatment:

- Check and comb the hair with a nit comb to remove nits and lice every 2–3 days. Continue checking for 2-3 weeks. This decreases the chance of self-reinfestation.
- Use a nit comb—**regular combs are too big** to remove nits.
- Remove all nits; some lice shampoos do not kill nits.
- Nit removal may not be needed when using some medications. See medicine instructions.
- If no dead lice are found and lice appear active after 8–12 hours, the medicine may not be working. Consult your doctor.
- If a few live lice are still found 8–12 hours after treatment, but are moving slowly, do not retreat. The medicine may take longer to kill all the lice. Comb dead and live lice out of the hair using a nit comb.
- Retreatment is meant to kill any surviving hatched lice before they produce new eggs.
- For some drugs, retreatment is recommended routinely about a week after the first treatment (7–9 days) and for others only if crawling lice are seen during this period. Retreatment with lindane shampoo is not recommended.

Lice in Schools

- If a child is found to have live head lice they do not need to be sent home early from school. They can be sent home at the end of the day.
- Once a student has completed their first treatment they can return to school, even if nits are present.
- Students who had direct, head-to-head contact with someone with an active infestation should be checked. If live lice are found, they should be treated.
- No-nit policies in schools are not recommended. They have not been shown to be effective at controlling spread.
- Checking an entire classroom or school has not been shown to be effective at controlling spread.

