

HEAD LICE

Head lice are tiny parasitic insects that feed on human blood. They have probably been around since the beginning of time; dried-up head lice and their eggs have been found on the hair and scalps of Egyptian mummies!

Head lice are not poisonous, but they can cause uncomfortable scalp itching and lead to sores from scratching. Lice infestations occur when people spread the insects to one another through physical contact—not as a result of poor hygiene. Children between the ages of 3 and 10 years are the most commonly affected age-group, because they are in close contact with each other in school and day care settings. These children often spread lice to their families at home.

Three Forms of Head Lice: Nits, Nymphs, and Adults

Nits are head lice eggs. They are smooth, oval-shaped structures that are attached to the side of the hair shaft. They may be yellowish-brown or white and are slightly smaller than sesame seeds. **Nymphs** are baby lice. They look like small adult lice and are full-grown about 7 days after hatching.

Adult lice are about the size of sesame seeds and are tan to grayish-white. Adult lice can live up to 30 days on a person's head. If they fall off the head, they cannot live for more than 2 days without a new human blood supply. Head lice tend to congregate behind the ears and near the nape of the neck. Signs of head lice infestation include tickling and itching of the scalp and irritability.

Removing Lice and Nits

Follow your health care provider's recommendations for treatment. Your provider may recommend using an over-the-counter medicated shampoo to kill the lice, or removing the insects manually with a special comb. Regardless of whether you use the shampoo, inspection of the scalp is necessary. If you use a medicated shampoo, perform the inspection at the time recommended by the shampoo's manufacturer.

Sitting under bright, natural light, part the hair. Parting the hair with tongue depressors or pencils allows you to avoid hand contact with the lice, and to see more clearly. You want to remove all nits! Move around the seated patient to see the scalp from every angle as you part the hair in various places. Closely examine the scalp, looking for small white or yellowish-brown oval-shaped specks attached to the hair near the scalp. Remove any nits and lice from the hair shaft with a lice-removal comb.

Repeat Inspection and Treatment May Be Needed

After completing the treatment recommended by your health care provider, inspect the scalp and remove lice and nits every 2 to 3 days. All family members should be checked at least once per week. Continue to do this at least 2 to 3 weeks after the initial treatment, until your inspection finds no insects. Re-treat the scalp with medicated shampoo if your provider recommends it.

Treat the Household

Wash all washable clothes and bed linens touched by the infected person during the 2 days before treatment. Use the hot water cycle for washing, and dry clothes on the hot cycle for at least 20 minutes. Dry-clean clothing that is not washable. Vacuuming is the safest and best way to remove lice or nits attached to fallen hairs from furniture, rugs, stuffed animals, and car seats. Soak combs and brushes used by the infected person in rubbing alcohol or disinfectant for 1 hour.

Never borrow combs, brushes, hats, or clothing from another person. Also avoid hanging coats, scarves, or hats next to those owned by others, to reduce your chances of picking up head lice.