

Head Lice

If your child comes home with head lice, don't panic. Anyone--adult or child--can get head lice. Head lice are passed from person to person by direct contact or on shared objects (combs, towels, headphones, etc.). *It has nothing to do with cleanliness and does not reflect poorly on you as a parent.*

How Does a Person Get Head Lice?

You get head lice by direct contact with a person who has them. Or you can get head lice by contact with articles used by an infested person such as combs and brushes, hats and helmets, bedding and upholstery.

What are Lice?

Lice are small, wingless, grayish-white insects with flattened, elongated bodies and somewhat oval heads. They are about 1/16 to 1/8 inch long. There are three species on humans. One species feeds specifically on the head and is called the head louse. They do not hop, jump, or fly. Their legs are adapted for grasping a person's hair.

What Are Some Signs of Head Lice?

Lice cause intense itching of the scalp. If your children scratch their heads constantly or excessively, check the scalp for nits or lice.

How Can You Check for Head Lice?

Carefully and thoroughly inspect the person's head. Look for tiny white eggs (nits) on hair shafts, near the scalp, especially at the nape of the neck and behind the ears. Nits are small (about 1/32 inch), white to cream color, and oval in shape with a distinct cap. Nits are often the first sign of a head lice infestation.

One simple way to check for lice is to have the person hold their head over a light-colored towel. Then, brush the hair and scalp vigorously towards the towel. Dislodged lice will be found on the towel. Head lice are small grayish-tan insects without wings. Because infested people usually have few lice, you can easily miss finding them.

What If You Suspect Someone is Infected?

Don't keep it a secret. It's not a social disgrace, nor is it a sign of any lack of cleanliness or personal hygiene. Inform your pediatrician or family physician or county public health department. Every family member must be checked or you will perpetuate the problem and reinfest the child.

What Medications Are Effective Against Lice?

Several over-the-counter products (pediculicides) are available at most drugstores. These include

RID®, A200® and R&C Shampoo®, Nix®, Kwell®, a shampoo that contains the insecticide “lindane” is available by prescription. Before using any head louse product, talk to your physician. While most children do not react to these shampoos, it’s always smart to play it safe and talk to your doctor first about *your* child’s health and the use of these products.

Mechanical removal of louse eggs helps reduce the number of lice that might hatch on the scalp. Special combs (provided with the pediculidides) should be used according to product instructions. Nits are more easily removed after shampooing the hair, when it is still damp. Although trimming the hair is not necessary, it does make it easier to remove all of the nits.

The effectiveness of these over-the-counter products is of concern. Also, the safety of lindane to small children and expecting mothers has been questioned. Public health officials are having much better success with oil treatments. Using olive and coconut oil on the head for at least eight hours works as a contact to kill and cause breathing problems for the lice. Low-fat mayonnaise does not work - it does not have enough oil. Some people have tried vaseline, but it is difficult to remove from the hair. Others have tried WD 40, but it is toxic and not recommended.

What Else Can Get Rid of Lice?

The primary focus should be on the treatment of the head of the person with the lice. In addition, wash clothing, hats, headbands, bed linen, and towels using hot (120°F or higher) soapy water. Dry in a clothes dryer on hot cycle for 20-30 minutes.

Woolen or other non-washable clothing can be dry-cleaned, but this additional expense can be avoided by isolating the articles for three weeks. Hats, stuffed toys, etc. also can be isolated for three

weeks and should be “louse-free” after that time period. Or you can kill lice by putting articles into the freezer for 24 hours.

Keep children’s coats, hats, and other personal items separated from each other as much as possible.

Thoroughly vacuum carpets, upholstery, pillows and mattresses. Vacuum car seats and car upholstery, too.

Do I Need to Spray My Home with an Insecticide?

Lice cannot survive for more than about 24-36 hours when removed from a person. They do not live in cracks or crevices. They do not live on pets. They must feed on humans in order to survive.

Spraying furniture, carpets, and bedding with an insecticide unnecessarily exposes family members to additional pesticides. Vacuuming carpets and furniture and cleaning vinyl with hot, soapy water is adequate.

Application of insecticides on home furnishings, in the day care, or in a classroom is not necessary and is strongly discouraged.

Following the steps given here, you can eliminate head lice from your home and help prevent their spread in the community.

Source:

M.G. Waldvogel and C.S. Apperson. North Carolina State University Department of Entomology Extension Specialists. (www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/cen/notes/Urban/lice-faq.htm) 1998.

NOTE: Use of brand names or mention of commercial products are a convenience to the reader and do not imply endorsement or discrimination by University of Wisconsin-Extension.

Author: Joan E. LeFebvre, Professor, Department of Family Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension
Reviewer: Phil Pellitteri, Insect Diagnostician, UW-Madison
Layout: Penny Otte, Program Assistant I, Family Living Area Office, Vilas County

For more information on Parenting the Child Development, contact: Joan E. LeFebvre, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin-Extension, 330 Court Street, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521-8362, 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu
October, 1999