

# A PARENT'S GUIDE TO HEAD LICE

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## **What are Head Lice?**

Head lice are small insects that live in people's hair and feed on their blood. Lice glue their eggs, or "nits," to hair. Head lice die quickly (within two days) without feeding so they cannot live very long away from your child's head. Eggs take 6 to 9 days to hatch, and 7 or more days for the lice to become egg-laying adults. They move by crawling; they cannot jump or fly.

Head lice are one of the most common communicable conditions. An estimated 6 to 12 million infestations occur each year in the United States, most commonly among children ages 3 to 11 years old. They are not dangerous and do not transmit disease, but they are contagious and spread easily.

## **How do people get Head Lice?**

Children can give head lice to other children from head-to-head contact and when they share combs, hats, clothing, barrettes, helmets, scarves, headphones, or other personal items.

Head lice are a problem in homes, day care centers, elementary, and preschools. Children are much more likely to get lice from family members and playmates than from classmates at school. The risk of getting infested by a louse that has fallen onto a carpet or furniture is very small.

## **How do I know if my child has lice?**

The only way to know if your child has lice is to look through their hair. If your child has head lice, their scalp might be itchy. Don't confuse dirt or dandruff with eggs (nits). Eggs stick on the hair. Head lice are generally found on the scalp, around the ears and at the back of the neck. The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed. Eggs, or nits, are smaller and pearl-grey in color and are attached to the hair near the scalp. Look carefully, using a magnifying glass and natural light.

## **My child has Head Lice. Now what?**

If head lice are found in your child's hair or scalp, it's important to contact your healthcare professional to learn about treatment options. Please inform your school nurse and any close contacts in an effort to control the spread of head lice.

### How long do lice live?

A louse is a parasitic insect. Parasites need a host to provide nourishment so they can live. Head lice form a parasitic relationship with humans as their host, with blood from the scalp as their source of nourishment. As long as there's a food source readily available, an adult louse can live for as long as 30 days on a human. However, this short lifespan is perpetuated by the constant laying of eggs. Female lice lay up to six eggs each day.

Nits, or lice eggs, can't live without a human host. They need the warmth of the scalp for incubation purposes before they hatch. Once they've hatched, they need the nourishment they get from human blood. Nits that are dislodged from a hair shaft will most likely die before they hatch.

Nymphs and fully mature adults can survive for only about a day without a food source. Adult lice can't live past 24 hours or so, on non-human surfaces such as carpets, hardwood flooring, clothing, furniture, sports helmets, headphones, or hair accessories.

### Prevention and Control

- Avoid head-to-head (hair-to-hair) contact during play and other activities at home, school, and elsewhere (sports activities, playground, slumber parties, and camp).
- Do not share clothing such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, hair ribbons, or barrettes.
- Do not share combs, brushes, or towels. Disinfest combs and brushes used by an infested person by soaking them in **very** hot water for 5-10 minutes.
- There is NO proof that the following products work as treatment:
  - Vinegar
  - Compounds that say they dissolve the glue on nits "to ease their removal"
  - Mayonnaise
  - Olive oil
  - Tea tree oil

### Myths & Facts about Head Lice

**Myth:** Only dirty people get head lice.

**Fact:** Personal hygiene or household or school cleanliness are not factors for infestation. In fact, head lice often infest people with good hygiene and grooming habits.

**Myth:** You can use home remedies like mayonnaise to get rid of head lice.

**Fact:** There is no scientific evidence that home remedies are effective treatments. You should talk to your health care provider about treatment options, including prescription products that are currently available.