

Head Lice: A Fact Sheet For Parents

From your School Nurse--Informational purposes only

Each year approximately 6 to 12 million children between the ages of 3 and 11 years of age are infested with head lice. While the odds of your son or daughter developing head lice are relatively small, the following includes useful information from the Centers for Disease Control on how to spot and treat this condition.

What are head lice?

Head lice are small parasitic insects that are found on the head, eyebrows and eyelashes of people. They feed on human blood several times a day and live close to the human scalp. They are usually found on the nape of the neck, behind the ears, and at the crown of the head. The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed and is tan to grayish-white in color. An adult louse can live about 30 days, but will die in 1-2 days if it falls off a person. They lay about 6 eggs each day. Nits are lice eggs. These are firmly attached to a single hair shaft, and are tan, oval shaped and very tiny.



Actual size of the three lice forms compared to a penny. (CDC Photo)

How do you get head lice?

Lice are "equal opportunity" parasites. They infest all socioeconomic groups, races, genders and ages, but are more commonly found in children due to their close contact with each other. Spread from one child to another occurs primarily through direct head to head contact. The sharing of personal items such as hats, scarves, helmets, brushes, combs or pillows can also spread head lice but it is less common. If someone in your child's class develops head lice, there is no reason to panic and automatically assume that your child will "catch" head lice. Dogs, cats, and other pets do not play a role in the spread of head lice.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of the head lice.
- Irritability and difficulty sleeping: head lice are most active in the dark.
- Sores of the head caused by scratching.

The diagnosis of a head lice infestation is best made by finding live lice in the hair. If you are not sure if it is head lice, the diagnosis should be made by their health care professional, school nurse or other person trained to identify head lice.

How can you treat head lice?

Treatment is recommended for people with active head lice. All household members and other close contacts should be checked.

Treatment for head lice includes:

- Over-the-counter (OTC) products
- Prescription products
- Alternative products- natural/herbal(although these are not proven effective and are not FDA regulated
- Nit-picking-this will ensure all eggs are removed and should be done every 2-3 days following treatment to decrease the chance of self-reinfestation.

Many approved products are safe and effective, but like all medical treatments, they must be used according to the label directions. Also, studies have shown that head lice are becoming more resistant to treatments so may be harder to get rid of.

How do you prevent head lice?

- Avoid head-to-head contact
- Do not share personal items such as hats, pillows and combs
- Machine wash and dry recently worn clothes and bed linens (130 degrees)
- Place stuffed animals in dryer for 20 minutes or bag them for 2 weeks.