

# Head Lice

## What Are Head Lice?

Head lice, or the medical condition known as pediculosis, are a pesky problem that anyone can have at some point in their life. Most often infestations occur in children 3 to 11 years of age.

Head lice are not dangerous and they do not spread disease but they can and do spread from person to person. Having dirty hair does not cause head lice.

Head lice cannot fly or jump and you cannot get them from your pets.

While they may be **found anywhere on the head**, they prefer to live on the scalp along the neckline and behind the ears. When lice bite the scalp they cause itching.

## How Do I Know If My Child Has Head Lice?

Children may say they have a tickling feeling on their head or may be very itchy on their scalp.

**It can take up to 4-6 weeks for a person to experience itching.**

The only way to be sure a person has an active case of lice is to find live lice.

Lice are not easy to see and can be hard to find. They are about the size of a sesame seed. They are usually greyish white or brown.

Nits are small, oval and blend into the color of the hair. Each nit is firmly attached to a hair. They cannot be washed out or flicked off like dandruff. Finding nits does not mean the individual has a current infestation and they should not be treated based on finding nits.



Head louse



Louse egg (nit) on hair

## How Do I Check for Lice?

Detection combing is the recommended method to check for head lice.

Detection combing is an organized examination of the hair, from the scalp outwards, to find head lice. Finding lice by parting the hair and looking at the scalp is not particularly efficient and likely to miss many infestations

Please see Head-Lice-Detection Combing handout

For a demonstration on detection combing:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=je-cWdTrhFQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=je-cWdTrhFQ)

## Can My Child Attend School?

Once children are treated they can return to school because:

- Head lice do not spread disease
- Children can have head lice for several weeks with no symptoms.
- The presence of nits indicates a past infestation that may not be currently active
- Cases of head lice are often misdiagnosed

## How can you prevent the spread of head lice?

- Teach your children how head lice are spread (by direct contact with the head of someone with an infestation) and to avoid this kind of activity.
- It is a good idea to teach your children not to share brushes, combs or head gear such as hats, bandanas, etc.
- Check your child's head for live lice once a week all year long and daily during an outbreak.
- Head-to-head contact may be less if long hair is braided or tied back.

## What is the Treatment for Head Lice?

- Health Canada recommends treatment with a topical insecticide (pyrethrins, permethrin 1% or lindane) or a non-insecticidal product called Resultz® (for use in individuals 4 years of age and older). These products are available over the counter at drug stores.
- Tell the pharmacist if anyone needing treatment is pregnant, breastfeeding, under 6 years of age, has allergies or a serious health problem.
- **It is very important to read and follow the package directions carefully.** Some products recommend that there should not be Crème Rinse or Conditioner on the hair, as it may prevent the treatment from working
- Each product is different and has detailed directions for use. For example one product might say it should be put on dry hair while another should be put on wet hair. Each will say how long it should be left on the hair before rinsing out.
- Avoid unnecessary contact with the product since it can be absorbed through the skin.
- The treatment course for each of these products involves an initial application followed by a second application in 7 to 10 days as per the manufacturer's recommendations.
- Most approved treatments will kill the lice, but are not effective against the nits.
- A second treatment in 7 to 10 days will kill the lice that have hatched since the first treatment before they are mature enough to lay new eggs.
- Check the heads of anyone who was treated daily for 3 weeks after the first treatment
- The presence of nits indicates a past infestation that may not be active.
- Public Health does recommend removal of nits within 1 ½ inches of the scalp to ease in identification of re-infestation
- If live lice are found on the head 24 to 48 hours after the treatment, contact your pharmacist or public health nurse for advice.
- **DO NOT treat unless you are sure that you have found a living, moving louse**

## Do Other Treatments Work?

Many home recipes and products sold in stores are based on mixtures of essential oils (eucalyptus, lavender, tea tree, etc), salts or other natural substances. Some people have used oils like mayonnaise, olive oil and Vaseline or hair gels to try to smother lice.

Public Health does not recommend any of these products as there is no proof that they work.

## I Keep Treating My Child But He/She Keeps Getting Head Lice. Why?

The following are several common reasons why treatment for head lice may fail:

- Applying the treatment to hair that has been washed with conditioning shampoo or rinsed with hair conditioner
- Insufficient application of pediculicide (the treatment)
- Re-infestation
- Resistance of the head lice to the treatment used
- Lack of removal of live nits that are within 1 ½ inch (3.81 cm) of scalp
- Misdiagnosis: Children can scratch for 2 or more weeks after treatment or other objects in the hair (dandruff or hair spray droplets etc) can be misidentified as lice

## What Cleaning Needs To Be Done?

Lice cannot live for more than 2-3 days away from the scalp so excessive cleaning is not necessary.

Choose the best method to clean the following items (washing in hot water for 15 minutes or running through a drier on the hottest setting):

- All personal hair care items such as combs, barrettes, etc. Repeat this daily until the lice are gone.
- Items that have been in prolonged or intimate contact with the child's head (bedding, hats, etc.) at the time of first treatment.

Items that cannot be washed should be placed in a sealed plastic bag for two weeks, or placed in the freezer for 48 hours at -10° C. (to prevent any eggs from hatching)

There is no need to vacuum or wash floors, carpets or furniture. Do not use household sprays or lice sprays. They do not work and may be harmful to people.

**For more information contact:  
your local Public Health Office  
or your Physician  
or Health Link Alberta 1-866-408-5465**