

# About Head Lice

# From the LCCS Health Office

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What are head lice?**

Head lice are small insects. They are very small (about 1/16 to 1/8 of an inch long), gray or light brown in color and have no wings. Head lice have curved legs that cling to hair shafts. They spend their entire life cycle on the heads of people sucking blood for nutrition.

### **What are nits?**

Nits are the eggs of lice. Female lice lay a "glue" with the nits that attach them to the hair shaft. A female can lay 50-150 eggs over a three to four-week period. The nits are tiny tear-shaped, firm objects, stuck to the hair shaft. Unlike dandruff flakes or lint, nits cannot be brushed or flicked away. Your School Nurse is likely to have examples of no-longer-living nits and lice in her office if you're not sure what to look for.

### **Where are head lice found?**

Head lice are not usually found off the head. Head lice cannot live for more than 48 hours without a meal therefore they do not live long off the head. It's unlikely that any removed nit will hatch but any nit or insect removed from the head should be taped to paper, flushed down a toilet or otherwise destroyed.

### **What is the life cycle of the head louse?**

Head lice eggs hatch in seven to nine days into the first nymph stage, which looks like a miniature adult. In about nine days, the louse will have passed through two more nymph stages and reach the adult stage. The adult will stay on the head for its entire life.

### **How do people get head lice?**

Head lice are usually spread by close personal contact with the hair of an affected person. It's possible that sharing personal items such as hats, headbands, coats, or storing these items close together such as in classrooms can spread lice. At home, sharing items such as combs, brushes, towels, soft toys and bed sheets could also *possibly* spread lice. **However** – most cases of lice come from direct exposure to a person with head lice. This can be as simple as a child whispering a secret to a classmate or reading together.

### **What are the symptoms of head lice infestation?**

People with early infestations may not notice any problem. Itching is the most common symptom caused by an allergic reaction to the bites. Other symptoms include a tickling feeling of something moving in the hair, irritability, and redness or sores on the head caused by scratching.

### **How are head lice diagnosed?**

Seeing the nits or lice is the only way to confirm an infestation with lice. It requires a thorough look at the scalp. Lice move quickly and can be hard to see. The best tool is a comb with very tight, metal teeth. Flea combs are often a great tool. Your School Nurse may supply them or you can check at drug or pet stores.

### **Can head lice spread any diseases?**

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Head lice do not spread any diseases. Sores caused by scratching can become infected. There is a different species (body lice) that can carry typhus but this is absolutely not what we see in children's hair.

### **What is the treatment for head lice?**

Over-the-counter or prescription shampoo, lotion, or cream rinse can be used to treat head lice. A comb with tight metal teeth is extremely helpful for removal of insects, even the tiny nymphs. There are products and home remedies that claim to loosen nits but removal by hand is usually necessary. If active lice are seen 8 to 12 hours after treatment, call your health care provider to see if a different product should be used. You can also contact your School Nurse for assistance.

### **Will the medications kill the nits?**

There is no guarantee that any product will completely kill all the eggs or insects. It's extremely important that the hair and scalp be thoroughly checked two to three days after each treatment. Most head lice products do not kill all of the eggs and recommend a second treatment in 7 to 10 days after the first treatment in order to kill any lice from newly hatched eggs. Again, a comb with tight metal teeth is very helpful for this process.

### **Is it necessary to remove all the nits?**

It's very difficult to tell which nit will hatch. Removing all nits reduces recurrence of lice infestation. It's very difficult to remove every nit during the first attempt. Repeat checkings and combing every day (or at least every other day) with a comb with tight metal teeth will help remove any new hatchlings.

### **How difficult is it to remove all the nits?**

Hair should be looked at in small sections while removing nits with the comb with the tight metal teeth (flea combs are usually effective too, as is removal by hand). Certain over-the-counter products and white vinegar may help to loosen the glue holding the nits to the hair. It often takes several hours over a period of days to remove all of the nits. Because of many reports of lice that are resistant to products designed to kill them, it's very important to remove all nits.

### **Is cleanliness important in preventing head lice?**

Infestations are not prevented by personal or household cleanliness, use of shampoos or length of hair. All social and economic groups can be affected by head lice. African Americans are less frequently infested than other racial groups but anyone can be affected.

### **How effective are home remedies?**

Many alternatives to head lice products are promoted because of treatment failures. But there is little research that these methods are effective at killing the lice and nits on the head. Some of these remedies include olive oil, mayonnaise, tea tree oil, petroleum jelly, and hair dryers.

**Never** use harsh substances such as kerosene or gasoline. Do not use pesticides (bug spray) that are not registered for treatment of lice (such as diazinon).

### **How can my family avoid being infested?**

All contacts of an infested person should be examined, but only those with live lice or nits should be treated. The examination and treatment of contacts, if necessary, should be done all at the same time. Treated people should be checked for at least two weeks to be sure the lice and nits are gone. Family members should avoid sharing combs, brushes, towels and other personal items.

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### **What else can be done to prevent the spread of head lice?**

It is probably impossible to totally prevent head lice infestations. Young children come into close head-to-head contact with each other frequently. Children should be taught not to share personal items such as combs, brushes and hats.

### **Should bug sprays be used in the home or school?**

The use of bug spray in the environment is not necessary since lice do not survive for long off the scalp. Vacuuming carpets and upholstered furniture will remove any stray lice or nits.

### **What is the school's role in the prevention and control of head lice in children?**

The child's parent or guardian should be notified of the infestation that day. The parent or guardian should be advised that prompt proper treatment is indicated and in the best interest of the child and his or her classmates. Siblings and other children in the school who were most likely to have had direct head-to-head contact with the infested child should also be checked. Some schools have "no nit" policies under which a child is not allowed to return to school until all nits are removed. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Association of School Nurses discourage such policies.

**Please see LCCS's policy for lice management.**

### **Where can I get more information on head lice?**

- Your child's School Nurse and Pediatrician
- Professional lice treatment offices (these tend to be good but very costly)
- American Academy of Pediatrics [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
- National Association of School Nurses [www.nasn.org](http://www.nasn.org)
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov>

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.

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