

Information Regarding Lice

What are head lice?

Head lice are small wingless insects (about the size of a sesame seed) that live on the human scalp and in the hair. There are records of lice for as long as there are records of humans!

Lice move by crawling; they can't fly, hop or jump. They can fall off the head and will then die within 48 hours. An adult female may lay 3-5 nits (eggs) per day which are glued so strongly to hair shafts that only fingernails or a specially designed 'nit' comb will remove them (normal brushing or washing won't remove nits). Once laid, it takes 7-10 days for a nit to hatch, and another 7-10 days for the female to mature and begin laying her own eggs.

Who is at risk for getting head lice?

Anyone who comes in close contact (head-to-head) with someone who already has head lice is at greatest risk. Occasionally, head lice may be acquired from contact with an infested person's clothing (such as hats, scarves, coats) or other personal items (such as brushes, towels, fabric sports helmets). This contact occurs most often at sleepovers, camps, sports, or other activities. Current research indicates that schools are often not the environments where the transmission is most likely. Head lice can also be transferred from person to person via coats, furry stuffed animals, fabric covered seats, pillows, carpets, and bedding which has been used by an infested person. Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with getting head lice.

What should parents look for?

Head lice are clear in color when hatched and can appear gray, tan or reddish brown in color after feeding. They have six legs. They are hard to see and avoid light.

Nits are head lice eggs. They are very small, about the size of a knot in thread. They are firmly attached to the hair shaft. Although they may look like dandruff, they cannot be removed by flicking them with the finger. Nits are oval and usually yellow to white but can look brown as the louse matures inside the egg. Eggs are usually located within an inch of the scalp. The casings without live lice remain on the hair shaft. Care should be taken to examine the scalp at the nape of the neck and behind the ears.

What are the symptoms of head lice infestation?

Some symptoms of lice infestation include: a tickling feeling in the hair; itching caused by a reaction to the bites; irritability; sores on the head due to scratching (which can sometimes become infected); or a rash behind the ears and on the neck below the hairline. However, it should be noted that head lice infestation could occur without any symptoms.

How are head lice discovered?

An infestation is discovered by looking closely through the hair and scalp for nits and/or lice. The discovery may be made by a parent, school nurse, or other medical provider.

How are head lice treated?

Head lice can be treated via a variety of methods, including: medicated shampoo (prescription or over-the-counter), oral prescription medication, and comb-outs. If using a medicated shampoo, product directions must be followed exactly. Most lice shampoos recommend a second treatment in 7-10 days. Do not use lice shampoo more often than recommended by the manufacturer unless directed to do so by your doctor. If you have questions about which treatment method is most appropriate for your child, please consult with your physician. Personal items, such as combs, brushes, towels, clothing, and bedding also need to be cleaned using high heat (130 degrees) , dry cleaning, or storage in an air-tight bag for at least two weeks. Furniture and carpets should be vacuumed. Lice sprays and regular shampoos are not recommended.

What can parents do to prevent their families from getting head lice?

Check your children for head lice at least every week. Use a bright light and look closely. Use a special lice comb to detect nits. Avoid sharing hair care items, clothing, hats, towels and bedding. Avoid throwing jackets and hats in a pile at group activities. Using medicated shampoos without the presence of lice or nits will not prevent a person from becoming infested.

What do the schools do when there is a reported infestation in the schools?

Although it is unpleasant, the occurrence of head lice is common throughout the country. If there is a reported case of head lice, the schools follow the approved administrative procedures based on the most current, research-based information. If an infestation is verified, the infested student may not return to school until treatment has been completed. Parents are given information about the steps to follow. It is important that instructional time be protected. The school nurse follows-up with that student and the treatment plan.

It is not best practice to either examine the entire school or notify the entire parent population regarding selected infestation of head lice. The school does everything possible to protect students' privacy

Please call your school nurse if you suspect that your child has lice or if you would like further information. All exchanges will be kept confidential.