

CONTROLLING HEAD LICE: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Your first clue may be a child scratching at an itchy head or a call from the school nurse. No matter how a parent discovers that a child has head lice, the experience is usually disconcerting. **THE HEAD LOUSE** The head louse is a parasite – meaning that it needs a host (person) for nourishment. It is a grayish-tan, wingless, cylindrical insect. While there are more than 3,000 different species of lice in the world, humans are only affected by three types. Head lice are the most common of the human lice species found in the United States. Head lice are highly communicable. Sharing a hat or a comb is all it takes for an infected person to spread them. Once head lice make their way to the scalp, they begin to feed. This causes the persistent itching that the victim experiences. The most visible sign of head lice infestation is the presence of nits, or eggs. Nits are small, silvery, and oval-shaped. Adult females attach these nits to hair shafts where the eggs hatch after 7-10 days. Once hatched, the louse reaches maturity in approximately two weeks and, when fully matured, mates quickly. During her one-month life cycle, a female louse may lay as many as 150 eggs.

PREVENTING HEAD LICE One common myth is that keeping a child's hair clean and short will prevent lice – this is not true. Lice appear to like hair whether it is clean or dirty, long or short. The key to prevention is avoiding contact with infested human hair or an object that harbors head lice. Therefore, parents should try to:

- Discourage the sharing of brushes, combs, and headphones.
- Keep children in their own beds at home, studies have shown that the sharing of beds and personal items among family members increases the risk of infestation.

DETECTING HEAD LICE Head lice may be difficult to spot. The insects themselves are only one to two millimeters long, and their eggs are sometimes mistaken for dandruff. However, parents are often able to detect lice by following the following steps:

- Conduct weekly head checks at home and tell the school nurse if you find lice.
- Search for lice and eggs in the hair, behind the ears, at the crown of the head, and the nape of the neck. Lice are grayish-tan and cylindrical in shape. Their eggs are tiny, oval shaped, and silvery in color, about the size of the eye of a needle.
- Check towels for signs of lice.
- Examine your child's closet to see if lice are on hats, hoods, jackets, or sweaters.

TREATING HEAD LICE Not so long ago, the treatment for lice involved kerosene and head shaving, we won't go into detail. Thankfully, modern medication (in the form of shampoos, lotions, and crème rinses) is now available, making lice treatment easier and far more pleasant than ever before. If you suspect your child has head lice, here is what you can do:

1) Wash your child's hair with a lice-killing shampoo. You should talk to your doctor or pharmacist about which product to buy. Follow the directions carefully for maximum results and to avoid the possibility of allergic reactions. For example, shampoo that is left on the scalp beyond the recommended time can cause inflammation or rash to sensitive patients. Misuse of products that contain Lindane can cause seizures or brain damage. While all residents of a household with an infected member should be shampooed, consult your doctor before shampooing any person under the age of three. Most treatments require a second treatment one week after the first, but sooner if a live louse is seen earlier.

2) Pick and/or comb all eggs from the hair. Rinses that loosen the nits can be applied to the hair after the lice-killing shampoo is used. No shampoo kills all the nits. Remaining eggs can be removed by picking or with a fine-toothed comb. All nits must be removed before your child can be readmitted to school.

3) Clean your child's clothes and surroundings. Lice can live for up to 48 hours without human contact, nits can last 10 days. Therefore, to prevent reinfestation, clean your child's environment of any live lice or nits:

- Carefully clean clothing, sheets, or any other personal item that may harbor lice by washing it in very hot water followed by twenty minutes in the dryer on high heat.
- Items that can't be cleaned (such as stuffed animals) should be placed in sealed plastic bags for at least two weeks at room temperature.
- Vacuum carpets, upholstery, mattresses, pillows, and car seats thoroughly.
- Clean combs and brushes in hot water or soak in lice shampoo for one hour.

4) Re-admitting your child to school. Before your child can re-enter school, you must transport your child to the school so that the nurse can check for lice and nits. Your child must be nit-free before re-entering school.