

HEAD LICE DISEASE FACT SHEET



What do Head Lice look like?

Adult louse: the adult is about the size of a sesame seed. It has 6 legs, and is tan to grayish white in color. In people with dark hair, the louse looks darker. Adults can live up to 30 days on a person's head. They feed on blood from the person's scalp. Off of the host, a louse may live up to 4 days. Nits: Nits are lice eggs. The eggs are firmly attached to the hair shaft, close to the scalp. They cannot be removed by brushing or shaking them off. Nits take 7-10 days to hatch. Nits will remain alive off of their host for up to 10 days. Nits that are more than ½ inch from the scalp are not alive and will not hatch.

What are the signs and symptoms of head lice?

The most common symptom is itching, usually being the ears and the back of the neck. Intense scratching may lead to a bacterial infection on the scalp.

How do head lice spread?

Head lice are highly contagious and spread through direct contact from person to person. They can also be transferred indirectly by objects such as coats, hats, hair brushes or combs, bedding or towels. Sharing items helps spread head lice. Dogs, cats, and other pets do NOT carry or transmit head lice.

How do you treat head lice?

There are over the counter and prescription treatments for head lice. These treatments must be used exactly as directed because they are pesticides and may cause injury. Pregnant women and young children should be treated under a physician's guidance. Home remedies such as mayonnaise, oils, and shower caps; do NOT kill head lice or their eggs. The topical preparations used to kill lice may NOT kill the eggs. That is why you must comb out the nits (eggs) with fine tooth nit comb or pick them out by hand. Also, a second treatment must be applied about 7-9 days after the first treatment. This is to kill any lice that may have hatched from remaining eggs. Do not wait longer than 10 days for the second treatment. The itching will continue after the lice are gone. Everyone in the household should be treated. Supplemental cleaning should include washing clothing, bedding, and towels used by the infested person in the 2-day period before treatment started. These items should be machine washed in hot water and dried in the hot air cycle for at least 20 minutes. Items that cannot be laundered should be dry cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag for 2 weeks. Clean combs and brushes in boiling water. Vacuuming furniture and floors is also helpful. Fumigating rooms and using sprays on furniture and carpet is NOT necessary.

Exclusions:

A child may be excluded if the child's health professional indicates treatment. The child may return after treatment is started. Some treatments require a 7-10 day follow-up. It is recommended to have the child avoid activities that may have head to head contact during that time frame.