

## **Facts about Head Lice: Please Read and Take Action**

### **Where do head lice come from?**

Head lice are parasitic insects that live in the hair and scalp of humans. Another name for head lice is pediculosis. Head lice do not come “out of the air” or from the ground. They are human parasites and have probably been here since the beginning of time. Lots of folks have misconceptions about head lice and the people who have them. Head lice can affect anyone: rich or poor, young or old, male or female. An outbreak of head lice in your family does not mean that you are a bad housekeeper or that you don’t bathe. It does mean loss of school for kids, loss of work time for parents, and often the unnecessary use and misuse of potentially harmful pesticide treatments.

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

Head lice are small tan-colored insects (less than 1/8<sup>th</sup> long) that live on blood they draw from the scalp. They crawl (they do not hop or fly). They deposit tiny, yellow/gray/white eggs known as nits on a hair shaft 3 to 4 mm from the scalp because the eggs need the warmth from the scalp for hatching. Head lice can live only 1 to 2 days away from the scalp.

### **Do head lice cause harm?**

Head lice rarely (if ever) cause direct harm, and they are not known to transmit infectious agents. Thus, they should not be considered as a medical or a public health problem. These lice may be burdensome because of annoyance; their presence may cause itching and loss of sleep. The greatest harm associated with head lice results from the well-intentioned but misguided use of caustic or toxic substances to eliminate the lice.

### **What can we do to prevent head lice?**

Watch for signs of lice, such as frequent head scratching.

The sooner nits (louse eggs) and head lice are detected, the easier and quicker it is to control and remove them...because they multiply quickly. This is the reason why the National Pediculosis Association recommends that parents screen their children regularly (several times a week) as part of routine hygiene.

### **How are head lice spread?**

Head lice can be spread whenever there is direct contact of the head or hair with an infested individual. Lice can also be spread through the sharing of personal articles like hats, towels, brushes, helmets, hair ties and so on. The extent to which head lice are transmitted to others via headphones and helmets is unknown, but considered rare. Still, risks of transmission are minimized when children have and use their own equipment. When sharing is necessary, the items can be cleaned between kids by wiping them with a damp paper towel. Children can also wear a baseball cap to help shield the hair from contact with the items. Helmets and headphones should never be sprayed. Most importantly – and best for the entire community – all parents should regularly screen their children for head lice and nits. There is also a possibility that head lice can be spread via a pillow, head rest, or similar item. Vacuuming is recommended for any areas or items that may be in regular contact with those who may be infested. Head lice do not jump (do not have hind legs to jump or hop) or fly and generally cannot survive longer than 24 hours off the host.

### **What are the signs and symptoms of head lice?**

Itching and irritability—the body’s allergic reaction to the bite, where lice feed on the scalp or neck. Nits may be glued to the hair, commonly behind ears and at, or near, the nape of the neck.

### **How do you treat a home or school for lice?**

Homes don’t get head lice - people do. Head lice are human parasites and require human blood to survive. Please do not use any pesticidal sprays in your home. They are unwarranted and may pose personal and environmental hazards. Vacuuming is the safest and best way to remove lice or fallen hairs with attached nits from upholstered furniture, rugs, stuffed animals and cars.

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

Treatment should be considered only when active lice or viable eggs are observed. There are no safe pesticides, “natural” or otherwise, that are scientifically proven to be 100% effective against head lice, nits or nit glue. Unnecessary and repeated use of potentially harmful chemicals contributes to ongoing infestations, outbreaks and resistant strains of lice.

Follow these treatment steps:

- Remove all clothing
- Apply lice-killing medicine, also called pediculicide, according to label instructions. If the affected person has extra-long hair, you may need to use a second bottle.
- **WARNING:** Do not use a crème rinse or combination shampoo/conditioner before using lice-killing medicine. Do not re-wash hair for 1-2 days after treatment.
- Have the affected person put on clean clothing after treatment.
- If some live lice are still found but are moving more slowly than before treatment, do not re-treat. Comb dead and remaining live lice out of the hair. The medicine sometimes takes longer than the time recommended on the package to kill the lice.
- After treatment, if no dead lice are found and lice seem as active as before, the medicine may not be working. Contact your health-care provider for a different medicine. Follow treatment instructions.
- Remove nits and lice from the hair shaft using a nit comb, often found in lice-killing medicine packages.
- After treatment, check, comb, and remove nits and lice from the hair every 2-3 days.
- Re-treat in 7-10 days.
- Check all treated persons for 2-3 weeks until you are sure all lice and nits are gone.

Treat the household:

- To kill lice and nits, machine wash all washable clothing and bed linens that the infested person touched during the 2 days before they were diagnosed. Wash clothes and linens in the HOT water cycle (130° F). Dry items on the hot cycle for at least 20 minutes.
- Dry clean clothing that is not washable (coats, hats, scarves, etc.) OR
- Seal all non-washable items (clothing, stuffed animals, comforters, etc.) in a plastic bag for 2 weeks
- Soak combs and brushes for 1 hour in rubbing alcohol or Lysol, or wash with soap and hot water.
- Vacuum the floor and furniture.

Cautions:

- Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding should not use head-lice medications.
- Consult a health-care provider before using lice-killing products on a person who has allergies, asthma, or other medical conditions.
- Do not use extra amounts of lice-killing medicines.
- Do not use lice-killing medicines on the eyebrows or eyelashes.

How can head lice be prevented?

- Educate parents and schools about head lice. All parents should know that outbreaks of head lice have nothing to do with family’s income, social status, or level of personal hygiene.
- Avoid direct contact with a person who has lice, or with their clothing or personal belongings.
- Watch for signs of lice, such as frequent head scratching. Nits do not cause symptoms, but they can be seen on the hair shaft; they are yellow-white-gray and oval-shaped.
- Teach children not to share combs, brushes, scarves, hair ribbons, helmets, headphones (unless wiped with damp paper towel), hats, towels, bedding, clothing, or other personal items.
- Examine household members and close contacts of a person with head lice, and treat if infested.

This information is taken from Harvard School of Public Health, American Academy of Pediatrics and Centers for Disease Control. It is not meant to be used for self diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider.