

# MANAGING HEAD LICE

## A PARENT'S SURVIVAL GUIDE

Presented by  
The South Orangetown **School** Nurses



# **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

## **1. How do you get head lice?**

Head lice spread through close contact, or through shared personal items, such as hats, helmets, combs, "nap mats," chairs, bedding, headphones and hair accessories.

## **2. Can head lice fly?**

No. Head lice are wingless insects that can't jump or fly, but they can crawl at a rate of 12 inches per minute.

## **3. Do head lice indicate that a person is dirty?**

No. Anyone can get head lice. Contrary to popular myth, you don't get head lice because of poor personal hygiene. In fact, head lice prefer clean hair.

## **4. Do head lice transmit dangerous disease?**

No. Head lice aren't known to carry disease.

## **5. How can I tell if my child has head lice?**

For most people, the most common symptom of head lice is intense itching. However, itching is not always present. You should also look for red marks on the scalp and neck, and check the head for lice and nits.

## **6. What do head lice look like?**

Head lice are tiny and brown, and the largest are the size of a sesame seed. Head lice may be hard to locate because they avoid light.

## **7. Do pets carry human head lice?**

No. Head lice are exclusively a human disease. However, a louse can be transmitted to a pet who, in turn, can transmit it back to the family. Head lice do not live off animals; they feed only on human blood.

## **8. How do head lice grow?**

Female head lice lay approximately eight eggs a day. The eggs are called nits and usually hatch in seven to fourteen days.

## **9. What do nits look like?**

Viable nits are tiny, whitish ovals. They are firmly glued to the hair shaft, most often near the scalp.

## **10. Are head lice limited to children?**

No. You can get head lice at any age, though it is most common for children between the ages of five and twelve.

## **11. Are nits the same as dandruff?**

No. Nits might be mistaken for dandruff, but unlike dandruff, nits can't be brushed off or removed by normal shampooing and washing.

12. Where are head lice located?

Head lice often gather behind the ears and just above the hairline at the nape of the neck, but they can be found anywhere on the head. Generally, they are easier to find on the crown.

13. How could my child catch head lice?

Your child can become infested with head lice from anyone that is infested-whether it is through direct contact, such as sitting close in the back of a car or on a "nap mat," or through the sharing of personal items such as hats, sports helmets, brushes or headphones.

14. How can I prevent a head lice infestation?

The best way to prevent a head lice infestation is to make sure that your child is careful about sharing any personal items with his/her siblings, classmates, and friends-especially brushes, hats, pillows, headphones, and sports headgear.

### ***QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SCHOOL'S HEAD LICE POLICIES***

15. As the school nurse, you should have prevented a head lice outbreak.

Unfortunately, no one can prevent a head lice outbreak. As you know, head lice spread easily so that a child can become infested in many ways. We give information to parents about how to prevent the spread of head lice to their children, and alert teachers about the signs and symptoms of head lice.

16. Head lice spread disease. What is the school doing to protect my child?

Head lice are not known to spread disease. We do understand that you don't want your child to get infested with head lice. The nurse sends all children in the school who had head lice home for treatment with a lice-killing product.

17. Did my child get head lice because the school is dirty?

No. Head lice live on the human head, not on furniture, floors, or even dirt. They can only survive away from a human host for 24 hours. In that 24-hour period, lice often rest on items that come into contact with the head, such as scarves, combs, and headphones. School-age children tend to share these items.

**18. What should I do to treat a head lice infestation?**

You should inspect every member of the household for head lice, treat those infected with a head-lice killing product, remove nits, and clean the house and personal items.

**19. Do I have to remove the nits even though I've used a head lice-killing treatment?**

Treatments kill head lice but they do not remove the nits. Proper head lice management dictates that the nits be removed. If they are not removed, the remaining nits can hatch and cause reinfestation. Since removing nits can be a time-consuming, tedious task, some parents have found that showing their child's favorite video or watching a special program helps to make the process go quicker.

**20. Is there any reason that I may not be able to use a head lice-killing treatment?**

Consult your doctor before using an over-the-counter head lice-killing treatment if you are pregnant, nursing, have allergies to ragweed, breathing problems, asthma, or head lice in the eyebrows or eyelashes. Also, contact your health-care professional if over-the-counter treatments prove unsuccessful.

**21. Can I use a home remedy to treat head lice?**

Home remedies, such as mayonnaise or petroleum jelly, are not clinically proven to be effective. In addition, never use unapproved remedies such as pet shampoo, gasoline, or kerosene, because they can be dangerous.

**22. If I use a head lice treatment, will I be immune to a head lice reinfestation?**

No. You cannot become immune to head lice. If instructions for lice treatments are not followed exactly and completely, or you don't take the proper steps to completely rid your home of head lice, they can come back and you will have a reinfestation. Even one missing nit can cause a reinfestation. Head lice can live up to 24 hours away from a human host, and nits hatch within seven to fourteen days. So, if lice are on the furniture, in the carpet, or even on a pair of headphones, they can find their way back to your head.

**23. What can I do to reduce the risk of a reinfestation?**

First, be sure to thoroughly examine your child's head after treatment and be sure to remove every single nit. You should check your child daily for several weeks to be certain that the treatment has been successful. Just one nit can cause a reinfestation. To prevent this, thoroughly vacuum and clean all rooms, furniture, and car upholstery. All washable items that have come in contact with the head of the affected personsuch as hats, bedding and pillows-should be washed in hot water, at least 130 degrees F, and dried in a dryer on the highest heat for at least 20 minutes. Items that can't be washed, such as stuffed animals and sofa slipcovers, should either be drycleaned or sealed in an airtight plastic bag for at least 14 days. All combs and brushes should be soaked in very hot water for at least 10 minutes, and then strands of hair and other debris should be removed with an old toothbrush.

**24. Is there anything my child can do to reduce the risk of reinfestation?**

Yes. Tell your child to avoid sharing hats, combs, brushes, and clothing with friends, and to be cautious during sleepovers. Close contact with an infested person is the most common way head lice spread. While at school, your child should place items, such as coats and sweaters, in his/her backpacks.

**25. Is there a resistant strain of head lice?**

It's not clear if there is a resistant strain of head lice in the United States. Some experts believe that resistance may develop or be worsened by improper use of head lice treatment products. If this is true, it becomes even more important for consumers to read and understand product labels and then use these products exactly as instructed. Until the question of resistance is resolved, it is crucial that parents follow head lice treatment product package directions exactly and be diligent in removing nits and cleaning their home.

**26. How can I help my family deal with the emotional stress of a head lice infestation?**

Your family can become frustrated over the meticulous, time-consuming steps you need to take to treat head lice. Children can feel humiliated about head lice, and can be upset by the frustration they sense at home. It's important for parents to be sensitive, and reassure their child that head lice is no one's fault, and it is not an indication of poor hygiene.

**27. What do I tell my child when I have to keep him/her home from school?**

Reassure your child that head lice is not their fault. Explain that anyone, at any age, can get head lice from direct contact or the sharing of personal items such as combs, brushes, and baseball caps, and that head lice is a problem that can be treated, and you will have him/her back in school as soon as possible.

**28. How do I help my child cope when other children tease/make fun/ call names?**

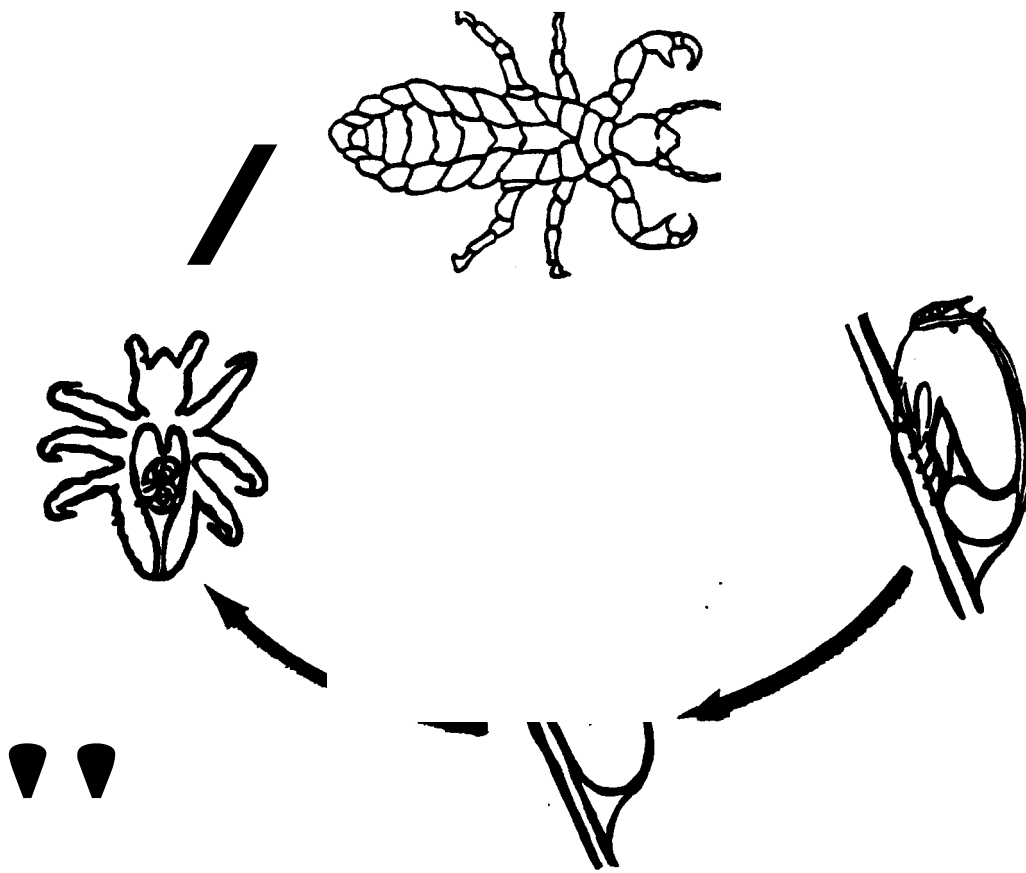
Allow your child to express their feelings and emotions. Then, explain to your child the facts about head lice-it is a common problem that anyone can get and is nothing to be ashamed of. Be positive, and let your child know that head lice are treatable. Provide support for your child.

**29. How do I approach the parents of my child's playmates to tell them that my child now has head lice?**

First treat your child with a head lice-killing product, and then explain to other parents that you've taken steps to get rid of the lice. Tell parents to check their own children for lice and nits. Reassure them that having head lice is nothing to be embarrassed about. It is a common problem that can be fought only by open communication and community action.

**30. I find this very embarrassing and I don't want to tell anyone? Is this okay?**

Don't be embarrassed. Remember, head lice is a common but treatable problem. Head lice do not discriminate in the types of heads they choose to live on. Anyone, at any age, can get head lice. **Be sure to tell your school nurse** so that she can help you, as well as check the other students.



**Stage 1.**

An egg, or nit, is cemented onto the hair shaft by an adult female louse.

**Stage 2.**

After about 7-14 days the infant louse, or nymph, emerges from its egg. Once hatched, the nymph must eat within one hour to survive. Nymphs feed on blood extracted from the host's scalp: nymphs feed they release an anticoagulant which can cause itching, a common symptom of lice.

**Stage 3.**

The nymph undergoes three levels of growth lasting 9-12 days before reaching full adulthood.

With seemingly no warning, a person can become infested with head lice. Unfortunately, mere warning signs to alert you to the presence of head lice. If you take action at the first sight of warning signs, you can help prevent the head lice from spreading.

Symptoms: For most people, itching is the most common symptom of head lice.

However, not everyone who is affected has itching so it is important to check all students.

Locations: Look for red marks behind the child's ears and on the nape of his/her neck, as these spots are where head lice typically gather. However, lice and their eggs ( called nits) can be found anywhere on the head.

Apearances: Lice are sometimes hard to see, because they're tiny, brown, and move to avoid. But nits are tiny, whitish, and are firmly glued to the hair shaft, usually near the scalp. Nits might be mistaken for dandruff, but unlike dandruff, nits cannot be easily brushed off or removed by normal shampooing and washing.

Seasons: Increased incidence of head lice infestations occur most frequently in the fall, between August and November; however, head lice is prevalent year-round.

Problems: Because nits adhere to the hair with a very strong, glue-like substance, it can be difficult to remove every nit. But it is critical to remove every single nit from head, since even one living nit can lead to a reinfestation.



1. Get tough - treat the head with a head lice-killing product

- Over-the-counter treatments, usually in creme rinse or shampoo form, are available at a pharmacy.
- Use only one treatment product at a time, and follow the directions carefully and completely.
- Never use the treatment product near the eyes.
- Home remedies, such as mayonnaise and petroleum jelly are not scientifically proven to work.
- Never use unapproved chemicals such as pet shampoos, gasoline, or kerosene.

2. Get picky - remove head lice and nits

The *Reasons*

- Treatments kill head lice, but they do not remove the nits.
- Unlike dandruff or hairspray, nits cannot be removed by blowing or brushing the hair.
- Removal of nits is absolutely necessary for proper head lice management.

The *Methods*

After treatment, and while hair is still damp:

- Part the hair into four sections. Select a section to work on. Start at the top of the new section you have picked.
- With one hand, lift a 1-inch strand of hair. Get the teeth of the comb as close to the scalp as possible and always comb away from the head.

\* If you pick nits out with your hands, you may want to wear rubber gloves, or wash hands carefully after nit removal on each child. Lice can live for a short time under your fingernails, and could be spread to you or to your other children.

- Using clips, pin back each strand of hair after you have combed out the nits. Clean the comb as you go. Wipe the nits from the comb with a tissue and dispose of the tissue in a seal to prevent reinfestation.
- When finished combing, recheck the entire head for nits and repeat combing if necessary.
- Check daily for head lice or nits you may have missed.

3. Make a clean sweep

- Clean your home thoroughly, as indicated on the other side of this sheet.

One of the most frustrating things about head lice is that it can spread easily and quickly through head-to-head or hand-to-head contact with an infested person. Any item that is used by a person with head lice, especially if it touches the head or shoulders, can become the source of a head lice infestation. To reduce the risk of spreading head lice within the household, or to prevent a reoccurrence in those who already have head lice, here's what you need to do:

1. Become a head lice detective

- The best way to detect an infestation is to routinely check your child's head for head lice and their eggs (called nits).
- The main symptom of head lice is intense scalp itching, but you can have head lice without itching.
- Check those at risk, especially children aged five to twelve. Girls may be affected more than boys because girls are more likely to share combs, hair accessories, and clothing.
- Head lice is prevalent year round. The most common months of head lice infestations are August to November.

2. Check for nits (lice eggs)

- Nits are tiny and whitish in color, so you may mistake them for dandruff. But unlike dandruff, they will not brush or blow the hair.
- Check for nits in bright light.
- Use a magnifying glass to help detect head lice and nits.
- Check the entire head, but pay close attention to the scalp. In particular, lift and separate hairs behind the ears and at the nape of the neck, as this is where head lice tend to gather.

3. Get smart about prevention - teach your child not to share personal items

- Combs, brushes, and headgear are some of the most common items that carry head lice from one person to another.
- Pillows, bed linens, hats, headphones, and bicycle and sports helmets can carry head lice.
- Encourage your child to share toys and books, but to keep some belongings personal and store them in a backpack if there are no private cubbies in the classroom.

4. If head lice are already in the household, make a clean sweep - clean your home thoroughly

- All personal head gear (hats, hair ribbons, helmets, etc.), scarves, coats, towels, and bed linens should be cleaned by machine washing in hot water then dried using the hot cycle of a dryer

1. Center for Disease Control and Prevention  
[www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/lice/default.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/lice/default.htm)  
(Information in English and Spanish can be downloaded)
2. Kids Health  
[www.kidshealth.org/parent/infections/common/lice.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/infections/common/lice.html)  
(English and Spanish)
3. National Pediculosis Association-I-800-446-4672  
[www.headlice.org](http://www.headlice.org)
4. Harvard School of Public Health  
[www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html)
5. Medline Plus-US National Library of Medicine  
[www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/headlice.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/headlice.html)  
(A source of additional websites)