

Lice

How Did I Get Head Lice (Pediculosis)?

Head lice are found worldwide. Head lice infest the head and neck and attach their eggs to the base of the hair shaft. Head lice move by crawling; they cannot hop or fly. Head lice are spread by direct contact with the hair of an infested person. Anyone who comes in head-to-head contact with someone who already has head lice is at greatest risk. Uncommonly, head lice may be spread by contact with clothing (such as hats, scarves, coats) or other personal items (such as combs, brushes, or towels) used by an infested person. Personal hygiene or cleanliness has nothing to do with getting head lice.



An adult head louse.
(Adobe Stock)

Where Are Head Lice Most Commonly Found?

Head lice and head lice nits (eggs) are found almost exclusively on the scalp, particularly around and behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the head. Head lice or head lice nits sometimes are found on the eyelashes or eyebrows but this is uncommon. Head lice hold tightly to hair with hook-like claws at the end of each of their six legs; head lice nits are cemented firmly to the hair shaft and can be difficult to remove.

What Are The Symptoms?

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of the head louse
- Difficulty sleeping; head lice are most active in the dark
- Sores on the head caused by scratching.

How Is Head Lice Infestation Diagnosed?

The diagnosis of a head lice infestation is best made by finding a live nymph or adult louse on the scalp or hair of a person. Because nymphs and adult lice are very small, move quickly, and

avoid light, they can be difficult to find. Finding nits firmly attached within a ¼ inch from the base of the hair shaft strongly suggests that a person should be treated.

How Is Head Lice Treated?

Treatment for head lice is recommended for persons diagnosed with an active infestation. All household members and other close contacts should be checked; those persons with evidence of an active infestation should be treated. Some experts believe prophylactic treatment is prudent for persons who share the same bed with actively-infested individuals. All infested persons (household members and close contacts) and their bedmates should be treated at the same time.

Retreatment of head lice usually is recommended because no approved head lice medicine completely kills all the lice. To be most effective, retreatment should occur after all eggs have hatched but before new eggs are produced. The retreatment schedule can vary depending on the pediculicide used.

1. Before applying treatment, it may be helpful to remove clothing that can become wet or stained during treatment.
2. Apply lice medicine, according to the instructions contained in the box or printed on the label. If the infested person has very long hair (longer than shoulder length), it may be necessary to use a second bottle. *Pay special attention to instructions on the label or in the box regarding how long the medication should be left on the hair and how it should be washed off.*
3. **WARNING:** Do not use a creme rinse, combination shampoo/conditioner, or conditioner before using lice medicine. Do not re-wash the hair for 1-2 days after the lice medicine is removed.
4. Put on clean clothing after treatment.
5. Comb dead and any remaining live lice out

Lice

of the hair using a clean, fine-toothed nit comb.

6. If 24 hours after treatment, no dead lice are found and lice seem as active as before, the medicine may not be working. Do not retreat until speaking with your health care provider; a different lice medicine (pediculicide) may be necessary. If your health care provider recommends a different pediculicide, carefully follow the treatment instructions contained in the box or printed on the label.
7. Nit combs, often found in lice medicine packages, should be used to comb nits and lice from the hair shaft.
8. After each treatment, checking the hair and combing with a clean nit comb to remove nits and lice every 2-3 days may decrease the chance of self-reinfestation. Continue to check for 2-3 weeks to be sure all lice and nits are gone.
9. Retreatment generally is recommended for most prescription and non-prescription (over-the-counter) drugs after 9-10 days in order to kill any surviving hatched lice before they produce new eggs.

What About My Clothing, Hats And Scarves?

Head lice do not survive long if they fall off a person and cannot feed. You don't need to spend a lot of time or money on housecleaning activities. Follow these steps to help avoid reinfestation by lice that have recently fallen off the hair or crawled onto clothing or furniture.

1. Machine wash and dry clothing, bed linens, and other items that the infested person wore or used during the 2 days before treatment using the hot water (130°F) laundry cycle and the high heat drying cycle. Clothing and items that are not washable can be dry-cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag and stored for 2 weeks. Soak combs and brushes in hot water (at least 130°F) for 5-10 minutes.
2. Vacuum the floor and furniture, particularly where the infested person sat or lay. However, the risk of getting infested by a louse that has fallen onto a rug or carpet or furniture is very small. Head lice survive less than 1-2 days if they fall off a person and cannot feed; nits cannot hatch and usually die within a week if they are not kept at the same temperature as that found close to the human scalp. Spending much time and money on housecleaning activities is not necessary to avoid reinfestation by lice or nits that may have fallen off the head or crawled onto furniture or clothing.
3. Do not use fumigant sprays; they can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.

**Contact a Health & Wellness Health Resource Nurse at (603) 862-2856
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