



Head Lice

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What You Need to Know

What Are Head Lice?

Head lice are tiny, wingless bugs that live on the head. They feed on your blood and can multiply and spread quickly. Head lice are about the size of a sesame seed and are usually grey to reddish-brown in colour. They have six legs with tiny claws that can attach to hair. They can be hard to see.

Nits are the eggs of mature head lice. They firmly attach, with a glue-like bond, on an angle to one side of a hair. Nits are small, yellowish-white ovals that are about half the size of a pinhead. They can appear darker in persons with dark hair.



Nit on a hair shaft, magnified

Nits hatch in seven to ten days. The baby lice are called nymphs. They look like adult lice, only smaller. Nymphs cannot lay eggs until they mature, which takes about seven days.

How Do Head Lice Spread?

Head lice do not jump or fly, but can crawl quickly. They are usually spread by direct head-to-head contact. Occasionally, they are spread by hats, brushes, hair accessories or headgear. You cannot get head lice from carpet or furniture. Head lice feed from the scalp and need a certain temperature and humidity range to survive.

What Are The Signs And Symptoms?

Here's what to look for:

- itching and scratching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites
- irritability
- bite marks or sores on the head, caused by scratching

How Do I Check For Head Lice?

The only way to know if a person has head lice is to see lice or nits. You must check the whole head. Pay careful attention to the areas behind the ears, at the back of the neck, and on top of the head. Follow these steps:

1. Part the hair in small sections.
2. Check from one side of the head to the other.
3. Check the whole head.

How Do I Treat For Head Lice?

- Buy a head lice product from the drugstore. Your pharmacist can help you choose the best product.
- Consult your pharmacist or doctor if the product is for a child that is under two years of age, a person who has seizures, or a woman who is pregnant or breastfeeding.
- Read all of the instructions on the package. It is important to follow all of the directions carefully for the treatment to work. Never mix different products together.
- Do not use a product if you are sensitive to any of its ingredients. Consult your doctor or pharmacist if you are allergic to chrysanthemums or ragweed.

- Check for live lice 24-48 hours after treatment. Finding live lice at this stage may mean the lice were resistant to the product you used and you may need to use a different one. Call your health care professional for advice.
- Repeat treatment seven to ten days later (as directed) to kill any newly hatched lice. Head lice products do not kill nits, so it is necessary to repeat the treatment a second time to kill any baby lice that hatch.

Do I Have To Remove All The Nits?

There is conflicting information about the need to remove nits. Studies have shown that it is not necessary to remove nits for treatment products to work.

However, there are practical reasons for removing the nits. Some schools and daycares have “no nit” policies, meaning you may be required to remove all of the nits before your child can return. Removing nits also makes it easier to identify a reinfestation. Many people also remove nits for aesthetic reasons.

Do I Have To Clean My House?

- Extra housecleaning and use of insecticide sprays are not needed.
- Items that have touched the head (hats, scarves, bedding, coats, towels, clothing) should be put in the dryer on the hot cycle for 20 minutes.
- Soak combs, brushes, and hair accessories daily in hot water to remove lice or nits.

Can I Control The Spread Of Head Lice?

The best protection is to check your child’s scalp once a week under good lighting. Teach children how head lice are spread and how to avoid them.

- Keep long hair tied back.
- Do not share headgear such as hats, scarves, hair clips, helmets, or headphones.
- Do not use other people’s pillows, towels, combs, or brushes.
- Notify friends and other community contacts when head lice are found.

Myths Busted

- Using bleach, hair dye, or mousse, or getting a haircut will not prevent head lice.
- Head lice do not result from a lack of cleanliness.
- There are no products known to prevent head lice.
- Animals do not spread head lice.