

Head Lice Fact Sheet

Head lice are small insects that live on the scalp, cause itching and spread by head to head contact. They do not spread disease and anyone can get them. They are more common in children as their heads often touch when they play together. They may also be spread through objects like scarves, brushes, head phones, hats and helmets. **Do not send a child with head lice to a school or child care facility until he or she has had *the first* of the 2 required treatments.**

What to look for:

Head lice:

- Tiny wingless insects
- Crawl and DO NOT JUMP or FLY
- Size of a sesame seed and can be difficult to see.
- Greyish-brown in colour

Nits (eggs of the louse):

- Nits attach to the hair shaft very close to the scalp
- Size of a grain of sand.
- Brown in colour when alive, white when dead or hatched.
- Do not come off easily. Hatch in about seven days.
- Nits *more* than 1 cm from the scalp are dead or hatched, or may be dandruff.

Where to look:

Lice or nits are found close to the scalp, particularly around the ears, at the back of the neck and forehead. Use a bright light and magnifying glass if available. Part and comb wet hair into small sections to help you see lice and nits better. **If you only find nits look closer for live lice.** If lice and nits are present act quickly and treat both.

How to get rid of head lice

Head lice Treatment.

Do not treat children unless they have live lice.

Your pharmacist can help you choose a head lice product. You do not need a prescription. Read the list of ingredients and the directions very carefully. Ingredients with permethrin (Nix or Kwellada-P) or pyrethrins

(R&C) are proven effective **when used as directed.**

Give 2 treatments 7 to 10 days apart. The first treatment will kill head lice but not all nits. The second treatment must be used again in 7 to 10 days after the first. Between treatments daily nit removal and hair combing are essential to get rid of head lice successfully. If you see live lice 48 hrs after the second treatment, contact your physician.

Nit Treatment

Daily nit removal and hair combing are keys to getting rid of head lice.

After head lice are treated, removing the nits can help to prevent a new infestation. Even with careful nit picking some live nits can be missed. Children may return to school or child care facility after the first treatment even if nits still remain in their hair.

To remove nits, use a bright light and part hair into small sections. With a fine-toothed nit comb or your fingernails pull the nits from the hair strands starting at the roots down to the tips. This is easier when hair is wet. Wipe the nits onto a tissue and place in a bag for disposal. After wash your hands with soap and water and soak the comb in hot water.

Alternative head lice treatment

Household products such as mineral oil and vinegar, petroleum jelly, mayonnaise and hair gel have been used to treat head lice. These methods have not been proven to work. Applying these products is thought to plug the holes through which the lice breathe. These products may be even less effective if only nits are present. If used, leave the product on the head overnight. After these treatments, wash and rinse hair with regular shampoo several times.

Check all close contacts. If one person in the family has head lice, it is possible that other family members will also have them. Tell your child's school, day-care, and children's groups (i.e. sports, clubs, etc.) so other parents can check their children's hair. An untreated source among close contacts is a common reason for getting head lice again.

It is important that all individuals who have head lice be treated at the same time.

Cleaning personal items

Head lice do not survive more than 3 days away from the warmth and humidity of the scalp. Nits will hatch in 7 to 10 days. Wash combs, brushes and hair accessories with hot, soapy water until all lice or nits are removed. Then soak them in very hot water for 10 minutes. Wash clothing, bed linens and towels in hot soapy water then put them in a hot dryer for 15 minutes. Items that you can't wash such as blankets, coats and stuffed animal you can put them in a plastic bag for 14 days. Sharing hair brushes while undergoing treatment is discouraged. Extra housecleaning is not needed. Do not use insecticide sprays.

Consult your doctor about treatment if...

- you are allergic to any of the ingredients
- you are pregnant or breastfeeding
- treating children under two years of age
- treating someone with a seizure disorder
- treating lice on eyebrows, eyelashes or beard
- the skin of the scalp is broken or infected
- the head lice infestation persists

How to prevent the spread of head lice

- Routinely check your child's head or daily during lice outbreaks when advised by your school or child care facility.
- Teach your child not to share personal items that are used on their head such as brushes, combs, barrettes, headbands, elastics, towels, hats, helmets, toques, and scarves.

More information: ottawa.ca/health or http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/head_lice

If you have further questions about head lice, call Ottawa Public Health at 613-580-6744 and speak with a Public Health Nurse.