

What are head lice?

Head lice are small insects (less than 1/8 inch long, approximately the size of a sesame seed). They range in color from red to brown, black, yellow-tan or gray-white. Head lice feed on blood they draw from the scalp and lay tiny, gray/white eggs (known as nits) on a hair shaft near the scalp. The warmth from the scalp is needed for the eggs to hatch. Head lice are not known to spread disease.

Who is at risk for head lice?

Head lice infestations occur in all socioeconomic groups, are not an indication of poor hygiene, and can affect anyone, but are most common in children attending child care or elementary school. People who have direct head-to-head contact to someone with head lice is the greatest risk. Household members of infested children are also at risk.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

Most people who have head lice do not have symptoms at all. When symptoms do occur, the most common signs include itching of the skin on the scalp or neck where lice feed. Nits are firmly attached to the hair, commonly behind ears and at or near the nape of the neck. Excessive scratching, especially behind and around ears and at the nape of the neck, may lead to open sores and a bacterial infection that also may cause swollen lymph nodes.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The period of time from the laying of eggs to the first nymphs hatching is usually six to nine days. Lice mature to the adult stage usually seven days after hatching.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice are spread most commonly by direct contact with hair. Additionally, infested people can also spread head lice by sharing combs, brushes, hats, blankets or sheets with others, but this is not very common. It can be spread only by live lice and not nits.

When and for how long is a person able to spread head lice?

Head lice will spread until they are treated with a chemical that kills lice and until the eggs have been killed or removed. Although research has shown that removal of nits may not be necessary, it may be recommended in conjunction with some treatment products.

How is a person diagnosed?

Diagnosing head lice is done by identifying the presence of live lice or nits within ¼ inch of the scalp. Identification of eggs and lice with the naked eye is possible; however, the use of a hand lens or microscope may help to confirm the identification.

What is the treatment?

Over-the-counter treatments and prescriptions that kill lice and most viable eggs are available. Follow the directions on the label. For more information about the treatment of head lice, visit www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/treatment.html.

If you have further questions about the treatment of head lice infestation, contact your healthcare provider.

Does past infection make a person immune?

No. A person who previously had head lice may get it again.

Should children or others be excluded from child care, school, work or activities if they have head lice?

Children attending child care should be excluded, but not until the end of the day. They may return to child care the following day after treatment has begun.

Children with head lice do not need to be excluded from school, but they should be treated as soon possible after diagnosis.

For both child cares and schools, minimize any activity that involves the child in head-to-head contact with other children or sharing of any headgear until after the child has been completely treated.

Adults do not have to be excluded from child care, school, work or other activities, but should be treated as soon as possible after diagnosis.

What can be done to prevent the spread of head lice?

Follow these steps to prevent the spread of head lice:

- Avoid sharing clothes, coats, hats, hair ornaments, helmets, headphones, combs, brushes, towels, and bedding.
- Combs and brushes should be washed in hot water (130°F) for 5-10 minutes.
- Items that cannot be washed should be bagged and stored for two weeks.
- Provide separate storage areas for clothing so that the personal articles of one person do not touch the personal articles of another.
- When an infestation is found, check the hair and scalp of all household members and treat only those who have lice and those who share the same bed with the infested person.

Additional Information

For additional information about head lice, head lice removal, and school exclusions, contact the North Dakota Department of Health, Division of Special Health Services, at 800.755.2714.

Resources:

American Academy of Pediatrics. [Children in Out-Of-Home Child Care]. In: Kimberlin DW, Brady MT, Jackson MA, Long SS, eds. *Red Book: 2018 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 31st ed. Itasca, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2018:[122-136 and 607-612].

Heymann, D. L. (2015). *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual, 20th Edition*. Pediculosis and Phthiriasis. American Public Health Association. 2015: 446-448.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. (2019). *Parasites - Lice - Head Lice*. www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/index.html