

Head Lice

What Are Head Lice?

Head lice are a pain but not a health hazard. Anyone can get head lice. Head lice crawl quickly from one person's head to another and multiply fast but do not live long. They live and breed on the hair of the head because it's warm and humid. Head lice are tiny (1-2 mm), flat insects that do not have wings and cannot jump or fly. They are greyish-brown in colour and are hard to see. Adult female lice lay a great amount of nits (eggs). Nits are half the size of a pinhead, tan to brown in colour and oval in shape. They may look like dandruff but they are firmly glued to the hair and cannot be flicked off. White nits more than 1 cm from the scalp have hatched or died. Itching and scratching are common signs of head lice. The best way to check for lice is to look for nits.

How to Get Rid of Head Lice

Treating head lice requires two treatments, one week apart. You can get a head lice shampoo, cream rinse or lotion from a drug store. You do not need a prescription but can get one from your doctor if you want to use your drug plan. Ask your pharmacist if you have any questions about the products. Head lice products do not prevent head lice so use only when lice or nits are present. When choosing a product, read the list of contents and the directions very carefully. Do not use a product if the person being treated is allergic to any of its ingredients.

- ▶ If you are pregnant or breastfeeding and need treatment for lice, consult your physician or public health nurse before choosing a product.
- ▶ For children under two years of age, consult your doctor before choosing a product for treatment of lice if they are discovered on eyebrows or eyelashes or if the skin of the scalp is broken or infected.

When using a head lice product, timing is important. If the product is rinsed off too soon, lice and nits may not be killed. If left on too long, it causes unneeded exposure to the lice-killing chemicals. Wait at least 24 hours before rechecking head for live lice. Sometimes head lice resist one product. If live lice are found 24 hours after the first treatment, try another product followed by the second treatment. Rinsing hair under a tap (instead of a shower) will limit skin exposure and prevent swallowing some of the product. These products should not be used near the eyes, nose or mouth. A towel held tightly over the eyes protects during treatment.

- ▶ If someone is helping you with the treatment, they should wear plastic or rubber gloves to avoid exposure to the product.
- ▶ Store unused head lice products away from the reach of young children.

Second Treatment:

► Apply a second treatment in one week to kill any newly-hatched lice before they can lay eggs (only repeat treatment once). After the second treatment and removal of the nits, check the head twice a week for four weeks to make sure all lice and nits are gone.

How To Remove Nits:

► Bright, natural light helps you to see the nits better. Comb the hair to remove tangles, and then take hold of a lock of hair. Use your thumbnail against your first finger to strip the nits from the hair starting from the roots right down to the tips. Place the nits in a bag. Pin back that lock of hair and continue until all nits are removed. Try to remove the very tiny eggs laid right next to the scalp.

► You can also comb out the nits holding a fine tooth comb on a downward angle. This is easier if a conditioner is used after treatment (avoid conditioner if using NIX). Some plastic or metal fine-tooth combs work better than others do.

What About My Friends and Family?

Follow up of close contacts (friends and family) is very important. Check the heads of all family members and be sure to tell others such as grandparents or babysitters. Everyone who has lice should be treated at the same time. Be sure to tell the school, daycare centre, and sports or other children's groups so the parents can be told to check their children's heads. Tell the parents of all playmates to prevent the spread and protect your child from being re-infested.

What Should I Do at Home?

Extra housecleaning and use of insecticide sprays are not needed. However, you will probably want to wash combs and brushes, headgear, pillowcases and towels in hot water. The heat of the water or the hot cycle of your clothes dryer will kill any live lice and nits. Head lice do not live on dogs, cats or other animals, only on humans.

Prevention of Head Lice

- Discourage children from sharing hats, scarves, combs, hair accessories and helmets.
- Keeping hair short will not prevent head lice.
- Check young school-aged children regularly for head lice, more often if there is an outbreak.
- An untreated close contact is a common reason why a reoccurrence may occur.

Questions? Infection Prevention and Control department 519-464-4400 Ext. 5253.

References:

Adapted from Lambton Public Health Head Lice Fact Sheet (Nov 2016)