

## **Facts about head lice:**

- Acquiring head lice is not a sign of poor hygiene, so that should not be a stigma to the child or embarrassment to parents. Well-to-do kids are as equally exposed to head lice as disadvantaged ones.
- Head lice can move around/crawl very quickly. However, it is untrue that they either jump or fly.
- Head lice are not transmitted from the family pets, so don't look at Fido or Whiskers if your child comes down with a case of head lice.
- While head lice are gross to think about, the good news is that they are easy to get rid of. Most head lice infestations respond easily to over-the-counter treatments containing permethrin (i.e. Nix) or pyrethrins (i.e. Rid). Experts indicate that there is not any one type of pediculocide to use; the key is to be successful in removing both head lice and the nits.

## ***The Life Cycle, Symptoms, and Spread of Head Lice***

### **Head Lice Life Cycle**

The life cycle of the head louse has three stages: nit, nymph, and adult. The life cycle of a single louse from egg to egg is about 1 month.

**Nits:** Head lice eggs are called nits. Nits are laid by the adult female louse and are attached to the base of the hair shaft by strong cement. They are located close to the scalp because they require body heat for incubation. More nit characteristics:

- Size - 0.8mm by 0.3mm
- Shape – Oval
- Color - Yellow to white Location – Within 6 mm of the scalp
- Duration - Nits take 6 – 9 days to hatch.

**Nymphs:** When an egg hatches, it releases a nymph. The nit shell stays attached to the hair and turns a dull yellow color. The nymph looks like an adult louse but is smaller. As the nymph grows, it molts out of its exoskeleton 3 times before it becomes an adult. More nymph characteristics:

- Size – Variable but about the size of a pinhead
- Shape – Same shape as the adult louse
- Color – Yellow to rust-colored
- Location – Close to the scalp, especially behind the ears and at the neckline
- Duration – Nymphs become adults after about 7 days

**Adult:** The adult louse feeds about 5 times a day by piercing the skin with its claws, injecting irritating saliva, and sucking blood. Lice do not become engorged like ticks, but their color changes to a rust color after feeding. Head lice hold onto the hair with hook-like claws found at the end of each of their 6 legs. Adult lice are active and can travel quickly. More adult characteristics:

- Size – The size of a pinhead. The female louse is larger than the male.
- Shape – Oval with 3 legs and claws at the end of each leg
- Color – Rust

- Location – Close to the scalp, especially behind the ears and at the neckline
- Duration – Adult lice can live up to 30 days on a person's head
- Reproduction – An adult female can lay up to 8 nits per day

## Symptoms of Head Lice

- Scalp itching
- Sensation of something moving in the hair
- Red or [pustular](#) sores on the scalp caused by scratching
- Swollen lymph nodes in the front and back of the neck

## Transmission of Head Lice

Head lice can be spread by direct contact with the head or hair of an infested person. The adult louse can survive up to 1-2 days without feeding on the scalp; therefore can be found on objects that have been in contact with an infested person. Examples of objects that commonly spread head lice are:

Clothing such as hats, scarves, coats, and sports uniforms  
 Hair care instruments such as combs, brushes, or towels  
 Other objects such as pillows, beds, carpet, and stuffed animals

## Diagnosis of Head Lice

A head lice infestation is diagnosed by direct visualization of the lice in any portion of the life cycle. Usually there are many more nits than adults or nymphs. Finding nits within a quarter inch from the scalp confirms an infestation that needs to be treated. Nits can be distinguished from dandruff flakes as they are extremely adherent to the hair shaft, whereas dandruff can be easily moved on along the hair shaft.

## Head Lice Prevention

To prevent your child from getting head lice, it can help to:

- teach them to avoid sharing things that have been on or near another child's head, including hairbrushes, combs, hats, scarves, towels, helmets, etc.
- make sure your child hangs up his coat and hat on an individual hook, or some other separate area, when he gets to school, instead of just throwing them in a pile with other classmates' clothing
- regularly clean things that your child's head has direct contact with, such as car seats, pillows, head phones, etc., if you are sharing these items with other children

However, since 'young children come into close head-to-head contact with each other frequently,' according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, 'it is probably impossible to totally prevent head lice infestations.' That makes it important to check your children regularly for nits and live head lice so that you can discover a head lice infestation as early as possible and begin treatment before it spreads to the rest of your family and your child's friends and classmates.

## Head Lice Treatments

The main treatments for head lice usually involve using a head lice shampoo, like Rid or Nix, and then patiently and diligently removing nits with a lice comb. Be sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions for whatever products you choose to use. Also be sure to wash your child's clothing and bedding in hot water and vacuum to remove lice and nits from furniture, carpets, stuffed animals, etc.

- Nits hatch in 7-10 days and develop into an adult in another 7-10 days which can then lay more (up to 100) eggs. So it is important to remove all of the nits to break this cycle. Also, since anti-lice shampoos don't usually kill nits, you have to usually retreat the child in 7-10 days to kill any newly hatched lice.

### **Preventing Re-infestation**

To prevent reinfestation, the following may be helpful:

- Make sure all family members and friends of the infested person have been closely scrutinized for signs of lice. If any of them appear to have lice, make sure they are treated.
- Wash all clothing and bed linens used by the infested members of your family in hot water and place in a hot dryer for at least 20 minutes. If this cannot be done, place the linens and clothing into an airtight bag for two weeks. Dry cleaning also kills lice and nits.
- Vacuum backs of chairs, pillows in living and bedroom areas, mattresses, car seats, headrests and rugs that might be in contact with infested hair. Empty and discard the vacuum bag. There are some OTC sprays for disinfecting furniture and bedding which contain insecticides that are not suitable for humans or animals, so be very careful not to confuse them with the products for human use.
- Disinfect combs, brushes, sports helmets and other objects that come in contact with the head by soaking in medicated shampoo or very hot soapy water.
- Recheck all family members and friends seven to 14 days and 21 to 28 days after initial treatment to be sure lice have not reappeared. (Eggs that remain after treatment will hatch in seven to 14 days.)

Though discovering that your child has head lice is no picnic, neither is it a cause for panic or shame. The problem is shared by a good portion of the American school population and can be controlled through vigilance and appropriate treatment.