

Treating Head Lice

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny bugs the size of a sesame seed. Young lice are clear, but as they feed on blood they become reddish-brown to black. Head lice don't cause health problems, but they can be annoying. Getting head lice does not mean a person is dirty. It means they have been in close contact with someone who has head lice.

How do you get head lice?

Head lice don't fly or jump but they can move quickly. Head lice travel from person to person after close contact. Sharing hats, brushes, combs, or pillows can spread head lice from one person to the next. Also putting coats, hats, or scarves of infected people next to coats, hats, or scarves of others (like in the same cubicle at school) can spread lice. But head-to-head contact, like when children are playing together, is the way head lice are most likely spread.

How do I know if my child has head lice?

Children with head lice may say their head is itchy. Some children may have red bumps on their scalp. If you look closely, you may see the live lice, but not always. Seeing nits, or lice eggs, is often the only way to tell your child has lice. The tiny yellowish-white oval nits are stuck to the hair shaft and may look like dandruff. Unlike dandruff, nits are not flaky or easily removed from the hair. Nits may be found throughout the hair, but are most often seen at the back of the head, just above the neck, or behind the ears.

How do you treat head lice?

Once you know your child has head lice, you should begin treatment.

- First, use an over-the-counter (OTC) lice product with permethrin 1% (*Nix*) or pyrethrins (*RID*, others). Use these products exactly according to the directions.
- You may also want to remove the nits. Check the hair in one inch sections. A fine-tooth lice comb can be used to comb out any remaining lice and nits. Not removing nits can cause the lice products not to work as well.
- Use a second treatment with the OTC lice product nine days after the first treatment, to kill any remaining lice or lice that have just hatched. This may be different than what the product label says, but this is the best time to retreat.
- If you still see live lice after two treatments, call your child's prescriber. There are prescription lice treatments that can be tried.
- Don't use dangerous chemicals such as rubbing alcohol, kerosene, gasoline, or paint thinners. "Natural oils" like tea tree or ylang ylang oil may not be safe and should also be avoided. There is no proof that home remedies like mayonnaise and olive oil will work. Other things like petroleum jelly (*Vaseline*), *Cetaphil* (*Nuvo* lotion), or electronic combs can be tried, but must be used exactly as recommended. If these are used, children should be carefully watched for new lice for a few weeks.

Once I've treated my child, how do I keep them lice free?

- Wash clothes, bedding, and towels used by your child in the last two days. Use hot water (130 degrees F) and/or dry them in a hot dryer (for at least 20 minutes).
- For items that can't be washed you can put them in the dryer, vacuum them, or put them in a sealed plastic bag for two weeks.
- Soak combs and brushes in hot water (at least 130 degrees F for 5 to 10 minutes).
- Going overboard with house cleaning is not necessary. Lice sprays on furniture are not needed.
- Carefully check your child's hair (and other household members' hair too!) for several weeks after treatment. Continue to check their hair every now and again. The sooner you know your child has lice, the easier it is to treat it and keep it from spreading.

[This handout may not cover all possible information. It does not replace the need for professional medical care. Always follow the instructions from your health care provider.] [August 2015]