

Lice (Head Lice, Pediculosis)

What are head lice?

The head louse is a small, grayish-white insect about 1/16 to 1/8 of an inch in length that lives in hair and on the scalp. The nits (eggs), larvae, and adult lice can be seen easily and are often found near the nape of the neck and around the ears.

Who gets head lice?

Head lice occur in all socioeconomic groups and are not a sign of uncleanliness. Anyone may get head lice under the right conditions. Head lice are most typically found in children who are in elementary and day care.

How are lice spread?

Spread of head lice can happen during close personal contact with a person who has head lice. Head lice are wingless insects that move relatively quickly, which is why they spread easily from person to person. However, they do not jump or hop. They can also be spread by sharing combs, brushes, hats, caps, wigs, curlers, and other headgear or by storage of items in a shared locker.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

Itching is the most common symptom of head lice infestation, but those with a light infestation (1-5 lice) may not complain. Therefore, a thorough examination of the hair and scalp is necessary to find head lice or nits.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Itching may occur two to three weeks after infestation with head lice.

How long is a person able to spread head lice?

Lice can spread as long as they remain alive on a person or on clothing.

What is the treatment for head lice?

Medicated shampoos or cream rinses are used to kill lice. They are available by prescription or over-the-counter. Some shampoos are not recommended for infants, young children, or women who are pregnant or breast feeding. Always follow the directions on the label of the shampoo. The shampoo should be used again in 7-10 days to make sure any lice which hatched after the first treatment are killed. Special fine-toothed combs are usually available with the shampoo to aid in removing nits.

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

1. Contacts of people with head lice should be checked for nits or lice and treated, if necessary. They should also be taught not to share combs, brushes, hats, or other headgear.
2. Clothing, sheets, blankets, and bedspreads should be washed in hot water (128° F) for five minutes to destroy lice and eggs. Dry cleaning or storing clothing in plastic bags for 10 days is also effective.
3. Combs, brushes, and similar items can be treated by soaking them for 5-10 minutes in a pan of water heated to 128° F or by soaking them for one hour in the medicated shampoos.
4. Cleaning of carpets or furniture should be limited to a simple vacuuming.

For more information regarding lice, visit the following resource:

- www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/