

Head Lice

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny, greyish brown, wingless insects that live on the scalp, feeding on human blood. They lay eggs which stick to strands of hair very close to the scalp. Once the egg hatches the empty case left behind is called a nit.

Head lice are hard to see because they are tiny and move around on the head. Eggs are very small, about one-third (1/3) the size of a sesame seed and take 6 to 12 days to hatch. The nits are easier to see and are found further down the hair shaft. Both eggs and nits may look like dandruff, but they cannot be easily removed because they are sticky.

Do head lice cause illness or spread disease?

No, head lice do not cause illness or spread disease. However, they can be irritating because of the discomfort they cause and how easily they are spread from person to person.

How are head lice spread?

Anyone can get head lice. Having head lice does not mean a person has poor personal hygiene or lives in an unclean environment. Anyone who has hair can get head lice.

Head lice are commonly spread among children and adults who have close head-to-head contact. Head lice cannot jump or fly from 1 person to another. They are most commonly spread through head-to-head contact by crawling from one hair to another. There is a very small chance of head lice spreading indirectly through shared pillowcases, hair accessories, brushes, and combs.

How do I prevent the spread of head lice?

Head lice can best be controlled through the cooperation of parents, children, daycares, schools, and health care providers. Checking the hair of all family members weekly using the wet combing method is the best way to prevent the spread. Children should be encouraged not to share hats, combs, hair accessories, or hairbrushes. If your child has long hair, tie it up or put it in a braid.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

Often people who have head lice will have no symptoms for 4 to 6 weeks with their first case.

Symptoms of head lice may include:

- crawling or tickling sensation on the scalp;
- itchy scalp due to an sensitive reaction caused by the bites; and
- scratch marks or small red bumps like a rash.

How can I tell if my child has head lice?

The most accurate way to check for head lice is the wet combing method:

- Wash and rinse the hair. Apply enough conditioner to cover the whole scalp (usually 2 handfuls). The conditioner stops the lice from moving, making them easy to find.
- Use a wide tooth comb to get the tangles out. At any time if the comb tugs, add more conditioner.
- Begin combing the entire head with a lice comb. Pull the comb through the hair in one stroke from the front to the back of the head. Keep the teeth in contact with the scalp for the entire stroke.
- After each stroke, wipe the comb on a paper towel and check for lice.

If no lice are found, repeat the above process weekly as part of your family's hygiene routine. Having head lice once does not prevent someone from getting them again.

What are safe options for treating head lice?

Treatment should be considered only if live lice are found. Head lice will not go away without treatment.

If one person in the household has head lice, there is a good chance other household members do as well. All members of the household should be checked on the same day and those with lice should be treated.

There are many different products and ways to treat head lice. Some health experts recommend wet combing and others recommend chemical treatments.

Wet Combing treatment

This method removes live head lice. Wet combing is less expensive and non-chemical. Combing treatments are done following the same steps used to check for lice. Any young lice, that hatch from eggs after the first session are removed at the second, third and fourth sessions. This is why it is important to do the full series of sessions. Use generous amounts of hair conditioner and a special lice comb, every 4 days for at least 2 weeks. If lice are found on the final combing, add one more combing in 4 days until no live lice are found.

Wet combing is safe for infants, young children, as well as pregnant and nursing mothers. Contact your public health unit at www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/partners/health-authorities/regional-health-authorities for complete instructions on the wet combing method.

Chemical treatments

Non-prescription products – Shampoos, creams, rinses and sprays that contain an ingredient that kills lice are available at most pharmacies without a prescription. Some examples are permethrin, pyrethrins, isopropyl myristate, and dimethicone.

These products may not be appropriate for children or adults of all ages, so speak to your health care provider or pharmacist to find out which is best for you or your child. Always carefully follow the directions for use on the label.

After treatment, the hair should be checked and eggs and lice should be removed. The nits may also be removed, although you don't have to remove them, as nits are empty eggshells.

Most treatments are repeated in 7 to 10 days to make sure that any head lice that have hatched after the first treatment are killed before they have a chance to lay any eggs. It is also important to check the head for any eggs and remove them after the second treatment. Itching may last for 7 to 10 days, even after successful treatment.

Head lice have started to develop resistance to many of the chemical products. If you think the product is not working after 24 to 48 hours, use the wet combing

method to check for lice. If lice are found, use a different treatment method. Head lice cannot develop resistance to non-chemical treatments.

The medications should be kept out of the reach of young children. Some medications cannot be used for infants, young children, pregnant or nursing mothers and should only be used following advice from a health care provider.

Children should receive their first treatment, whether wet combing or chemical, at home the first day that they are found to have head lice. Children should not be sent home or kept home from school or daycare because of head lice. The child should be encouraged to avoid head-to-head contact with other students until after their first wet combing or chemical treatment. Parents should check their child weekly for head lice using the wet combing method.

Confidentiality should be maintained in order not to embarrass a child or family who has head lice.

When should I call my health care provider?

Call your health care provider if the treatments are not successful. Chemical treatment of pregnant or nursing mothers and of children less than 4 years of age should be given only under the direction of a health care provider.

What options are not recommended for treating head lice?

Methods and products that should not be used because they are either not safe or do not work include: insect sprays, motor oil, gasoline, alcohol, flea soap, dyes, bleaches, heat applied to the scalp, garlic, tea tree and other essential oils, electric lice combs, and shaving the head.

What should be cleaned?

Healthy head lice rarely leave the scalp and if they do they may only survive for 24 to 55 hours. Head lice are not shared through contact with furniture, pets or carpets. There is no evidence that a major cleaning of the house or car is necessary. Hats, pillowcases, combs, and hairbrushes that have had contact with the head of the person with head lice in the previous 3 days, could be considered for cleaning in hot soapy water. Also clean supplies that you used for wet combing in hot soapy water.

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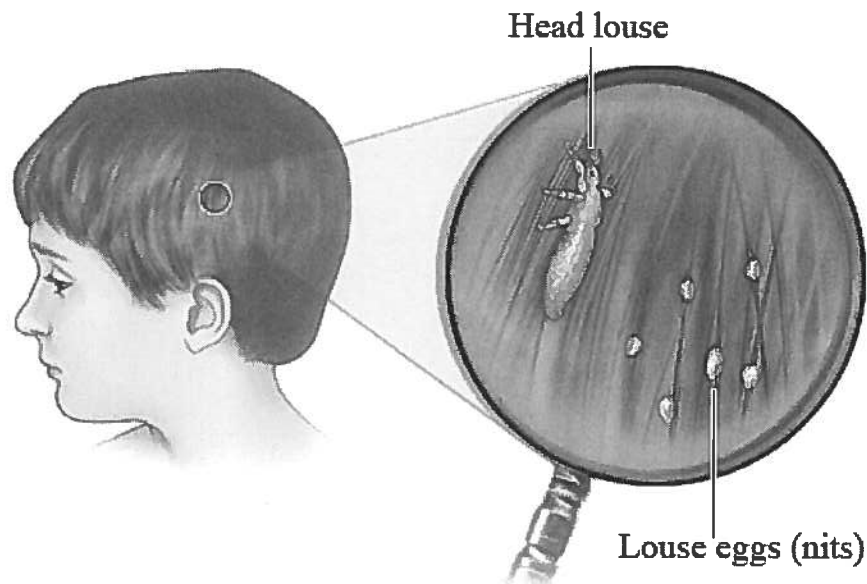
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Home / Health Topics / Search Health Topics / Head Lice: Appearance on Hair

Head Lice: Appearance on Hair

Head lice and their eggs (nits) can be seen on hair, the nape of the neck, and behind the ears. They can vary in colour from white to brown to dark grey. The eggs are tiny round or oval shapes that are tightly attached to the hair near the scalp and do not slide up and down on the hair. The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed.



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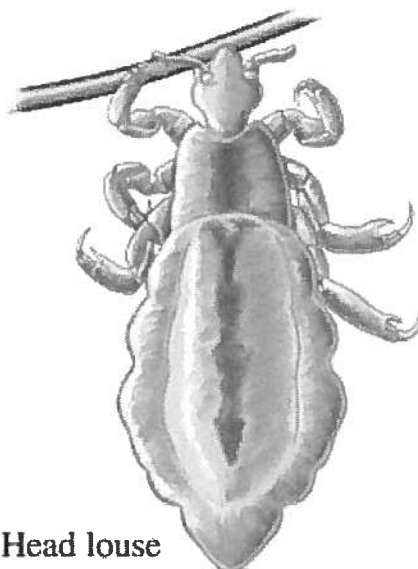


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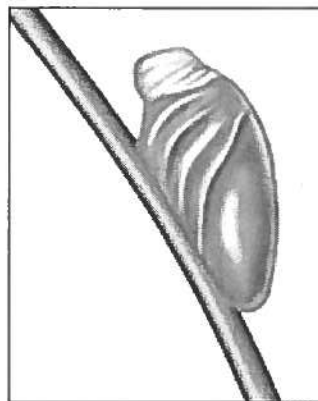
Home / Health Topics / Search Health Topics / Head Lice

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Head louse



Louse egg (nit) on hair

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Adult head lice are approximately the size of a sesame seed [2.5 mm (0.1 in.) to 3.5 mm (0.14 in.)] and can vary in colour from white to brown to dark grey.

Louse eggs (nits) are much smaller [1 mm (0.03 in.)] and look like light grey or brown oval cylinders glued to individual hair shafts.

Head lice spread easily from one person to another through close bodily contact or through shared clothing or personal items such as hats or hair brushes.

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Lice: Removing Nits From Hair

British Columbia Specific Information

Lice are tiny insects that live on the human body or clothes, and feed on our blood. There are three different kinds of lice that affect humans: head lice, pubic lice, and body lice.

Head lice and pubic lice will not go away without treatment. Treatment should only be considered if head lice or live nits are found. All medications for head and pubic lice are available over the counter without a prescription from your doctor. This includes both oral medications and medications that you can apply to the surface of your body (topical). Body lice can be gotten rid of by bathing and washing personal items; no medicine is needed.

For more information on lice, including how they spread, signs and symptoms, and treatment options, see [HealthLinkBC File #06 Head Lice](#), [HealthLinkBC File #08h Pubic Lice](#), and [Body Lice](#).

Topic Overview

Lice eggs (nits) stick to the hair and can be hard to remove. After treatment, some nits may survive. You don't have to remove all of the nits. But some people use a comb to remove nits after using lice medicine, because they don't like the look of nits in the hair.

The recommended way to treat lice is to use over-the-counter medicated creams, lotions, or shampoos that kill lice. After you rinse the medicine from your hair, you can use a fine-toothed comb to remove nits. The combs are often packaged with over-the-counter lice shampoos. A flea comb that's made for dogs and cats will also work. This is called wet combing. Comb for at least 15 minutes (until you find no more lice or eggs).

If two treatments of medicine do not kill the lice, you can try wet combing every few days. This process can take a lot of time, and you must make sure to get every louse and all eggs. Stop 2 to 3 weeks after the last session in which you found an adult louse.

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Home / Health Topics / Search Health Topics / Lice: Cleaning Lice From Combs, Clothing, and Other Items

Lice: Cleaning Lice From Combs, Clothing, and Other Items

Topic Overview

Lice can spread from human to object to human, but it's more common for lice to spread by human-to-human contact.

Removing lice from objects such as combs, clothing, and furniture is not a necessary part of treatment for head lice, but some people choose to do this as a way to help prevent lice from spreading to other household members.

Lice don't live longer than 2 days when they are not on a human. So you would only need to remove lice from items that the person with lice has used or worn in the 2 days just before he or she used lice-killing medicine.

If you choose to remove lice from household items, here are some tips:

- To rid hair brushes, combs, barrettes, and other hair ornaments of lice, soak them in hot water [at least 54.5°C (130°F)] for 5 to 10 minutes.
- Machine-wash towels, hats, scarves, clothes, bedding, and cloth toys in hot water [at least 54.5°C (130°F)] or place them in a dryer on the high heat setting for at least 5 to 10 minutes. Dry-cleaning or storing clothing in a sealed plastic bag for 2 weeks will also destroy lice. These methods are the main treatment for a person who has body lice.
- Vacuum carpets, upholstery, and mattresses to remove hairs that might have live eggs attached.
- You do not need to fumigate the house with insecticide sprays. This will not help treat or control a lice problem and may unnecessarily expose family members to toxic fumes.

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