

FACT SHEET

Head Lice

What are head lice?

Head lice are small insects, about the size of a sesame seed. They live on the scalp, eyebrows, and eyelashes of humans. Head lice feed on human blood several times a day. They cause itching (caused by an allergic reaction to the bites). Head lice are not known to spread disease.

How is it spread?

Head lice move by crawling, they cannot jump or fly. They are spread by direct contact with the hair of an infected person or by sharing personal items like hats, brushes, hair accessories, coats, towels, or bedding. Lice can also be spread by placing your head on furniture or car seats that were recently used by someone with lice. Theater seats, airline seats, and headphones are commonly linked to the spread of insects like lice.

What are the symptoms?

- Itching, especially around the ears and back of the neck
- Irritability or trouble sleeping - head lice are most active at night
- Tickling feeling or sensation of something moving in the hair
- Finding live lice (they are very small, fast and avoid light so can be hard to spot)
- Finding nits attached to the hair approximately 1/4 inch from the scalp

How can it be prevented?

- Avoid head-to-head (hair-to-hair) contact during play and other activities at home, school, and elsewhere.
- Do not share personal items such as brushes, combs, hats, etc.
- Place hats and scarves in coat pockets when not in use.
- Notify schools, daycares, and parents of playmates to alert for additional cases.

How is it treated?

NIX, synthetic permethrin 1%, is a recommended treatment for head lice. Follow directions, and re-treat according to manufacturer's recommendations. After lice treatment, the nits (eggs) should be removed using a fine-tooth nit comb. Comb daily for three weeks until no nits are found.

After treatment, machine wash (in hot water) all items used two days before lice were discovered. These items include towels, coats, sheets, pillowcases, clothes, toys, car seat covers, etc. Machine dry items in hot dryer for at least 30 minutes. Head Lice can also be killed by placing objects at below freezing temperatures for 24 hours or by sealing them in plastic bags for 14 days at room temperature. Combs and brushes can be cleaned by soaking in hot water (above 130 degrees F) for 5-10 minutes. Vacuum daily bare mattresses, couches, chairs, floors, pillows, carpeting, and car upholstery.

This fact sheet is for informational purposes only and is not intended for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.

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