



Fact Sheet: Head Lice

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used 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.

What are head lice?

Lice (louse) are parasitic insects that hatch from tiny eggs called nits. They live on the hair, eyebrows and eyelashes of humans where they feed on blood and lay eggs that take about one week to hatch (range 6 to 9 days). If the lice fall off a person, then they will die within two days because they do not have blood to feed on. The life span of adult louse is 30 days. Eggs can live on clothing for about a month.

How does head lice spread?

Head lice are spread through:

- Direct contact with an already infested person. Head-to-head contact is common among children during play at home, schools, daycare centers, or elsewhere such as sports activities, playgrounds, slumber parties or camps
- Wearing clothes and hats or using combs and brushes which have been used recently by an infested person
- Lying on carpets, bedding, couches, pillows, or stuffed animals which have recently been in contact with an infested person

What are the symptoms of head lice?

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of the head louse
- Irritability and difficulty sleeping; head lice are most active in the dark
- Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected with bacteria found on the person's skin

Although, uncommon, head lice can spread by sharing clothing or belongings. This happens when lice crawl, or the nits hatched on hair that has been shed. This can get onto the shared clothing or belongings. Examples include:

- Sharing clothing (hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms) or objects (hair ribbons, barrettes, combs, brushes, towels, stuffed animals) that were recently worn or used by an infested person
- Lying on a bed, couch, pillow, or carpet that has recently been in contact with an infested person.

Dogs, cats, and other pets do not play a role in the spread of head lice.

How is head lice diagnosed?

Head lice are diagnosed by the presence of adult lice or eggs. Lice may be hard to see. They are most commonly seen at the nape of the neck and behind the ears. Eggs may be seen as specks "glued" to the hair shaft. Eggs range in color from yellow to gray.

How is head lice treated?

Lice may be treated without having to go to the doctor. Head lice treatment shampoos and cream rinses can be purchased at any pharmacy. A person can contact his/her doctor or pharmacist for treatment recommendations.

Do not apply the lice treatment to a child younger than the age recommended on the product label. Pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers should check with

their healthcare provider before treating themselves or others.

How can head lice be prevented?

- Do not share clothing such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, hair ribbons, or barrettes
- Do not share combs, brushes, or towels. Disinfest combs and brushes used by an infested person by soaking them in hot water (at least 130°F) for 5–10 minutes
- Do not lie on beds, couches, pillows, carpets, or stuffed animals that have recently been in contact with an infested person
- Machine wash and dry clothing (using hot water (130°F) and the high heat drying cycle), bed linens, and other items that an infested person wore or used during the 2 days before treatment started. Clothing and items that are not washable can be dry-cleaned OR sealed in a plastic bag and stored for 2 weeks
- Vacuum the floor and furniture, particularly where the infested person sat or lay
- Do not use fumigant sprays or fogs. They are not necessary to control head lice and can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin