

Head Lice Information for Parents

Head lice are small, dark brown insects without wings. They are about the size of a sesame seed. They need human warmth and blood meals to live. The lice lay their eggs (nits) near the scalp, firmly attached to the hair shaft. Nits are light colored and oval shaped. Nits are seen more often than lice, and a bright light helps in seeing them. Dandruff and droplets of hair spray can sometimes be mistaken for nits. These are usually not attached to the hair shaft as tightly as nits. Nits and lice are found most often around the hairline of the neck and ears. People with lice usually have severe itching. The live lice do not jump or fly, but can crawl very quickly when heads are close together (such as when children sleep together or play close to each other). Sharing things like brushes or combs, hats, scarves can also lead to the spread of lice. They do not live on pets.

Recommended Treatment

When living head lice are found, the student must be taken out of school, and may not return until treated. Treatment of head lice must include attention to your child and his surroundings. All persons in the household and other close contacts of the student should be checked. Contacts should be treated only if lice or nits are found.

Lice and nit removal by hand is a necessary part of treatment, whether chemical or “natural” remedies are used. Some experts now believe that lice can be gotten rid of with very careful lice and nit removal and household measures.

- Wear disposable gloves.
- Use a very bright light or sunlight to inspect the hair. The process takes a while, so having the child and the parent seated is best.
- If the examiner is farsighted or has poor vision, a magnifying glass may be needed.
- Remove tangles from the hair with a comb or brush.
- Divide the hair into small sections, examining one section at a time and then fastening it away from the rest of the hair.
- Take a one-inch section of hair and use a lice comb to comb each hair section carefully. Not all lice combs work well; a comb with stainless steel teeth placed very close together works best. (Licemeister is one brand.)

- The comb should be dipped into water after each section is combed. A toothbrush or dental floss may be used to clean the comb as well.
- Continue combing each section of hair until all is thoroughly combed and checked.
- The parent should then keep checking a child’s head each day for at least 2 weeks.

Chemical/pesticide shampoos and cream rinses can also be used with some precautions:

- Talk with your child’s healthcare provider for instructions for treatment. If you have no healthcare provider, you may contact the Health Department or your pharmacist for treatment advice. Several medicated shampoos and cream rinses are available without a prescription. All of these products are toxic medications that need to be used with care, and only when necessary. Lice treatment should be done by an adult, not the child. Read the directions carefully before using them and follow all directions exactly.
- Before using the lice shampoo, you should shampoo the hair vigorously with regular shampoo to soften and loosen the nits in the hair. After this, comb the hair with the special fine-tooth comb. This can weaken and damage the nits and help the medicated shampoo work. Use the pesticide shampoo or rinse on towel-dried hair, as directed by health care provider or pharmacist, or as outlined on the box or bottle.
- Do not get the product into the child’s eyes—cover the eyes with a towel and tell the child to keep his or her eyes tightly closed. Any shampoo or rinse that does get into the eyes should be rinsed out immediately with large amounts of tap water. Keep these products out of reach of young children. Use the products over the sink, not in the tub or shower to avoid chemicals touching the skin. Medicated shampoos and cream rinses should never be left on the head longer than directed on the product label (usually ten minutes). Wash your hands well after using these products.
- After using the product as directed and rinsing, nits must be removed by combing the hair with a special fine-tooth comb made for this use. Using a vinegar rinse (1:1 solution of water and white vinegar) after shampooing (except with

Nix, creme rinse) may make it easier to remove nits. Have the child put on clean clothing immediately after the treatment.

- No known chemical kills all of the nits, and these must be removed by hand. This process is easier with a very bright light, and sometimes a magnifying glass is helpful. A student should not miss more than 1-2 days from school because of head lice. On days 2-6 after initial treatment, wash the hair with regular shampoo and comb out any nits that are still present.
- Treating again after 10 days may be necessary to get rid of any new lice that may still have hatched from nits that were not killed or removed. Never retreat before 7 days. Follow your healthcare provider's advice.
- The medicated shampoos and rinses do not prevent lice and should never be used unless live lice or nits are present.
- Some people have had success using oil, such as mineral oil or olive oil, to cover the hair, wrapping the head with a towel (not a shower cap), and leaving it on overnight. The oil is then washed out with regular shampoo. Hand removal of lice and/or nits is still necessary after this treatment.

Necessary household measures include:

- Machine wash in hot water, and dry on the hot cycle of the dryer to clean personal things such as bed linens, clothing and hats. Allow time between loads of laundry for the water to regain its hot water temperature. If only the dryer can be used, dry items for at least 20 minutes at the high heat setting.
- Dry clean or store things you cannot wash and store in a tightly sealed plastic bag for 10-14 days.
- Vacuum mattresses, pillows, cloth furniture, car seats and carpeting. Throw contents of the vacuum bag away in plastic trash bags, right after vacuuming.
- Soak combs and brushes in alcohol or Lysol for one hour.

- To control the spread of head lice, family members should not share things that touch the head, neck or shoulders (like combs, brushes, hats, scarves, coats, towels, stuffed animals child sleeps with). It is also important to wash your hands and clean under fingernails often.
- Animals in the home do not carry lice.
- Do not use dog shampoo, kerosene, or other products like these. They do not kill lice and can be dangerous.
- Treatment should be for the person with lice and his/her personal articles. The U.S. Public Health Service does not recommend spraying insecticides in the home, school or on school buses.

Cautions from the National Pediculosis

Association:

- Don't use shower caps during treatment and never leave the product on longer than directed.
- Don't use a prescription product containing the pesticide LINDANE.
- Don't use a chemical treatment on or near the eyes.
- Don't use a chemical head lice treatment on a baby.
- Don't use lice sprays.
- Don't treat people who are not infested.
- Don't use chemical treatments to prevent head lice.
- For more information, go to the National Pediculosis Association Web site: www.headlice.org
- Handout: A Parent's Guide to the "Nitty Gritty" about Head Lice
<http://pubs.caes.uga.edu/caespubs/pubs/PDF/headliceparents.pdf>

