

Head Lice

About Head Lice

An adult female head louse lays 6-7 eggs per day and lives for about one month. Eggs hatch within 7-10 days and lice reach adulthood in 8-9 days. One louse can turn into a significant infestation within a month.

Head louse eggs (nits) are white at first but turn brown before they hatch. Eggs are glued to individual hair strands about 1/2 inch from the scalp. This strong glue makes the eggs very difficult to remove. They cannot be shampooed out like dandruff and other debris.

Preventing Head Lice Infestations

Head lice are common among children, but people of any age, race, or socioeconomic class. Head lice infest clean hair as readily as dirty hair; it is not possible to prevent head lice infestation by washing hair frequently.

Head lice cannot jump like fleas. They have no wings and cannot fly. They are usually spread through close physical contact with someone who has adult lice in their hair.

Head lice may also be spread indirectly by sharing items that have been in contact with another person's head, including combs, hairbrushes, hats, ribbons, scarves, towels, or pillowcases, or by sitting on upholstered furniture or trying on clothing.

You can reduce your risk of head lice infestation by avoiding head-to-head contact during play or sports, not sharing



hats or hairbrushes, and keeping hair cut short or tied back.

Identifying Head Lice

Head lice infestation can cause itching of the head and neck. If your child scratches their head frequently, or you hear that one of their close friends has head lice, you should inspect your child's hair for lice or nits.

Nits look like tiny oval objects about half the size of a pin glued to the side of the hair shaft. They are usually found about 1/2 inch from the scalp.

Lice are most likely to be found near the scalp, especially behind the ears and near the nape of the neck. They will be between the size of a nit and the size of a sesame seed.

Lice and nits are very small (above). You may want to use a magnifying glass and flashlight to inspect your child's head. Adult lice may retreat when you shine a light on them.





Treating Head Lice

Over-the-counter treatments are available for head lice. When used correctly, these products are very safe and rarely cause side effects. However, some lice are resistant to the active ingredients found in these products, so they are not always effective. If this happens, live lice will be found after treatment.

Prescription treatments are also available for head lice. You must go to a doctor and get a prescription for these products. One of these treatments is called Ulesfia®. It contains 5% benzyl alcohol.

Over-the-counter and prescription head lice treatments kill adult lice but do not kill all nits. You should always comb hair carefully with a nit comb to remove any nits at the same time the treatment is applied. Combing (shown above) takes time and patience, but it is the **ONLY** effective way to remove nits from hair.

Some head lice treatments require a second treatment about a week after the first to kill any lice that have hatched



since the first treatment. You should always follow the instructions when using an over-the-counter or prescription product for head lice treatment.

Preventing Re-infestation

Anyone who has had close physical contact with a person who has head lice should be checked for lice, including family members and children's playmates. All family members who have head lice should be treated at the same time.

After treatment, machine wash all clothing and bed linens that have been in contact with a person who has head lice, then dry them on high heat. The person being treated should put on clean clothes.

Items that cannot be washed, such as stuffed animals and pillows, can be put in the freezer overnight or left in a sealed plastic bag for two weeks. You should also vacuum carpets, pillows, mattresses, car seats, and upholstered furniture that has been in contact with a person who has head lice. Throw away the vacuum bag after.

Insecticide sprays are not recommended for head lice infestations. They are not effective and may be harmful to children and pets.

San Mateo County Mosquito and Vector Control District

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Monday-Friday
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