

Pediculosis (Head Lice)

What are head lice?

The head louse (*Pediculous humanus capitus*) is one of three types of lice that can infest people. These insects are about the size of a grain of salt, and live in human hair where they feed on tiny amounts of human blood. Their eggs (called nits) resemble dandruff, but are attached to the base of the hair, close to the scalp. Head lice live only on the human scalp – they do not infest pets.

Can you see head lice?

It's hard to see adult head lice because they are very small, they avoid light, and they can move fast. It is easier to see the nits. Nits should not be confused with dandruff: dandruff can easily be flicked off the hair while nits are firmly attached to individual hairs.

Who gets head lice and what are the symptoms?

Anyone can get head lice. Head lice are easily spread from person to person by head-to-head contact – as a result, it is most common among preschool- and elementary school-age children and their household members and caretakers. They are not a sign of being dirty, and all socioeconomic classes are affected.

Lice aren't dangerous and they don't spread disease, but they are a nuisance. However, one sign of head lice is itching of the scalp that may lead to scratching and skin infections.

How are head lice spread and how long is a person able to spread them?

Head lice have no wings and do not fly or jump; they crawl. They are spread through direct contact with an infested person, including sexual contact, or with shared items such as combs, brushes, towels, pillowcases, hats, scarves, stuffed animals, headphones, other headgear, and clothing. Shared lockers and wall hooks may enable lice to spread on personal items. Spread of lice is especially easy in group settings (e.g., schools, childcare centers, slumber parties, sports activities, camps, playgrounds). They may be spread as long as lice or eggs remain alive on the infested person or in clothing.

Head lice need human blood to survive. They usually do not survive for more than two days away from the human body. Nits cannot hatch at the lower temperatures found away from the scalp.

What is the treatment?

Head lice are a nuisance, but they may be effectively treated. Detailed guidelines are provided on a separate fact sheet: Head Lice Management.

How do I prevent head lice from coming back or spreading to others in my home?

To prevent re-infestation, the hair of everyone in the household should be checked when anyone is found to have head lice. Everyone with head lice, as well as any persons who share the same bed with actively-infested individuals, should be treated on the same day (see Head Lice Management). Individuals should be able to return to school/daycare and their usual activities after the first treatment – “no-nits” policies that require a child to be free of nits before they can return to school/childcare facility are not generally necessary.

To prevent the spread of head lice, children should not share personal articles (e.g., coats, combs/brushes, hats, scarves, ribbons, barrettes, helmets, etc.).