



# Head Lice

PATIENT EDUCATION SERIES

## What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny insects which infest only the human head and are distinct from body and pubic lice. The head louse is gray in color but tends to take on the hair color of the host. The insect pest is usually found on the lower back of the head or behind the ears. They are about 1/16-1/8 inch long and flattened in shape. They have hook-like claws at the end of each of six legs to help anchor the louse to the hair shaft. The eye lashes may be involved. Head lice do not jump or fly.

A female head louse will live about 30 days on a host, and deposit about 3 eggs per day called “nits”. The nits are grayish white, oval, and are attached to the hair shafts next to the scalp. The nits hatch in about a week, and become adults over the next 9 days. Head lice do not carry or transmit any human disease.

## How do people get head lice?

Head lice can survive away from the human host for up to 3 days, and nits can survive for up to 10 days. The primary source of transmission is direct contact with an infested person but transmission through hats, brushes, combs, earphones, bedding and furniture is common. Human lice do not usually infest pets or other animals.

## What are the signs and symptoms of head lice?

The first major symptom of a louse infestation can be intense itching caused by the louse’s feeding, although certain individuals may not experience itching at all. Breaks in the skin caused by the louse and resultant scratching can cause secondary bacterial skin infection, especially in the absence of good hygiene.

## How is head lice diagnosed?

To check for infestation, the scalp must be examined for nits and lice. A provider at Health Services can perform this assessment for you.

## How is head lice treated?

Head lice cannot be treated by ordinary shampoos. There are many products to control head lice. They are formulated as creams, shampoos and lotions. Many of the products are over the counter such as Nix, which kills eggs and offers two weeks residual

protection. Follow the directions specific to the product you purchase. Most products come with a comb for nit removal. Do not use pesticide treatment near or around eyes. If brows and lashes involved use comb for removal.

First remove all clothing and then apply the pediculicide according to directions, then putting on clean clothes. Clothes, bedding and other items you have had contact with during the past 48 hours should be washed in hot water with a detergent and dried in a clothes dryer. Alternate means of disinfecting articles include dry cleaning, isolation in a plastic bag for 10 days, or placing in a freezer. Freezing is lethal to all cycles of the louse and so is a temperature of 125 degrees F for 30 minutes or more.

## Tips for Nit Removal

Most treatments also kill nits (lice eggs) but do not remove them, but it is possible for some nits to be left untreated. Because it is impossible to distinguish between living and dead nits, we recommend removing them. Use a fine-tooth comb to detect the presence of lice and nits. Work in a well lit area. Using the comb, go through each section from the scalp to the end of the hair. You can dip the comb into a cup of water or use a paper towel to remove any lice, nits or debris from the comb between passings.

## Preventing Reinfestation

To help prevent reinfestation, it is suggested that all family members or roommates be treated on the same day. Most products require a re-treatment 7 to 10 days later. This will kill the lice that hatch after the first treatment. Since head lice cannot live more than two days off the host, and are rarely found off the host, spraying or “bombing” the premises with insecticides is of little use.

The itch may persist for several days after successful treatment, but if symptoms persist after that see your medical provider.

2/11