

Head lice are a nuisance but not a health hazard. They don't result from a lack of cleanliness.

Anyone can get head lice. School children get them more often because they're frequently in head-to-head contact. Parents can get head lice from children. Sometimes the source is another adult in close contact with the children. Head lice crawl quickly from one person's head to another.

What to look for:

These tiny flat insects have no wings and cannot jump or fly. Head lice live and breed on the hair of the head. They're just 1-2 mm long, greyish-brown in colour and hard to see. Adult female lice can lay many eggs over a number of days and weeks.

Laid close to the scalp, the very tiny eggs are half the size of a pinhead, oval in shape, gray to brown in colour and difficult to see. They may look like dandruff but they're firmly glued to the hair and can't be flicked off. The eggs hatch in about 9 to 10 days. White eggshells are called nits. Those more than one cm from the scalp (due to hair growth) have hatched or died. Head lice don't live long and their eggs don't hatch away from the warmth and humidity of the scalp.

Itching and scratching are common signs of head lice. Often there are no symptoms at all. Because other scalp conditions also cause itching, the best way to check for lice is to look for nits. Act quickly if you find them.

How to get rid of head lice:

1. Treating head lice requires two treatments 7 to 10 days apart in most cases. Follow the product directions.
2. Get head lice shampoo or cream rinse from your drugstore. You don't need a prescription. Ask your pharmacist if you have any questions. Use head lice products only when lice or nits are present.
3. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding and need treatment for lice, before choosing a product consult your physician or telephone the Motherisk Program at the Hospital for Sick

Children in Toronto at (416) 813-6780. If you're treating others, wear plastic or rubber gloves.

4. Consult your doctor regarding treatment:
 - of children under age 2
 - of persons with seizure disorders
 - for lice on eyebrows, eyelashes or beard
 - if the skin of the scalp is broken or infected
5. When choosing a product, read the list of contents. Don't use a product if the person being treated is allergic to any of its ingredients. Follow the directions very carefully.
 - Sometimes head lice resist one product. If live lice are found 24 hours after the first treatment, consult with your pharmacist. You may have to try another product.
6. When using a head lice product:
 - Timing is important. If the product is rinsed off too soon, lice and eggs may not be killed. If left on too long, you're causing unneeded exposure to the lice-killing chemicals.
 - Rinsing the child's hair under a tap (instead of the shower or bath tub) will limit skin exposure and prevent the child from swallowing some of the product.
 - These products should not be used near the eyes, nose or mouth. A towel held tightly over the eyes will protect them during treatment.
 - When treating another person, wear plastic or rubber gloves to avoid unnecessary exposure.
 - Wash your hands well immediately after using a head lice product.
 - Store unused head lice products away from the reach of young children.

7. Second treatment:

- Head lice products kill the head lice and many of the eggs but one treatment usually doesn't kill all the eggs.
- Apply a second treatment (usually in 7-10 days) or as recommended on product to kill any newly-hatched lice before they can mature enough to lay eggs or transfer to a new head. Repeat the treatment once only.
- After the second treatment and removal of the nits, check the head twice a week for four weeks to make sure all lice are gone.
- If the problem continues, see your family doctor.

To remove nits:

With the two-treatment approach, removing the nits after treatment makes it easier to see new infestations. This aids in control and improves appearance.

- Bright, natural light helps you to see the nits.
- A magnifying glass also helps to see nits.
- Comb the hair to remove snarls then take hold of a lock of hair. Use your thumbnail against your first finger to strip the nits from the hair starting from the roots right down to the tips. Place the nits in a bag. Pin back that lock of hair and continue until all nits are removed. Try to remove the eggs very close to the scalp.
- You can also comb out the nits using a fine-tooth comb. This is easier if a cr me rinse is used **after** treatment but avoid after use of NIX. Some fine-tooth combs work better than others. Eggs very close to the scalp may need to be removed by hand.

Close contacts:

Follow-up of all close contacts is very important to prevent the spread and protect your child from being reinfested. Check the heads of all family members and treat those affected at the same time. Also suggest other close contacts be checked, such as grandparents or other family members, close friends, neighbours, or babysitters.

Tell your child's school or day-care centre, and children's group or team leader so the parents can be told to check their children's heads. Also tell the parents of all playmates.

Cleaning personal items:

You will want to wash combs and brushes, headgear, pillowcases, sheets and towels in hot water. Extra housecleaning and use of insecticide sprays are not needed.

Points to remember:

- An untreated source among close contacts is a common reason for reoccurrence.
- Head lice do not live on dogs, cats or other animals, only on humans.
- Keeping hair short will not prevent head lice.
- Check young school-age children regularly for head lice; more often if there is an outbreak.
- During outbreaks, schools can plan activities so that head-to-head contact is reduced. Coat hooks should be well-spaced, if possible. If not, outer clothing could be bagged and then hung up.