

Head Lice

Head lice are tiny crawling insects that live and multiply on human scalp. They do not transmit disease or cause permanent problems. Any person can get lice and it is quite common in school-aged children. Lice are passed from person to person by contact with infested persons or items that have recently been in contact with an infested person. These items include hats, coats, hair ribbons, brushes, combs, towels, pillows, or bed sheets. You do not get lice because you are dirty or unclean. Pets cannot get or transmit lice.

The adult head louse can live 5-6 weeks on the scalp, but it survives only 1-2 days on other surfaces. Most infestations involve about 10-20 adult lice. The adult female louse lays eggs, called nits, at the base of the hair shaft, mostly behind the ears and at the back of the head. Nits hatch in 8 days and mature in another 8-9 days. The empty eggshells look like small grains of rice that stick to the hair quite firmly and can't be simply flicked off like dandruff or dead skin. Finding nits that are more than 6mm (1/4 inch) from the scalp is only indicative of a previous infection. Treatment consists of the following steps;

1. Treating the infested person:

- Your physician will recommend one of several lice medicines. These medications can be either insecticides (e.g. Nix, R&C) or non-insecticides (e.g. Resultz, Nyda).
- Before applying the medicine be sure and remove all your child's clothing.
- Apply lice medicine, according to the instructions on the package.
- Do not leave the shampoo or rinse in hair longer than directed.
- Rinse hair well after the treatment.
- Do not use cream rinse or combination shampoo conditioner before using lice medicine.
- Do not re-wash hair for 1 to 2 days after treatment.
- Have infested person put on clean clothing after treatment.
- Re-treat exactly as above in 7 to 10 days.

2. Removal of nits

- Comb dead or remaining live lice out of the hair. Although lice move quickly away from any disturbance in dry hair, in thoroughly wetted hair their mobility is much reduced.
- Remove nits from the hair shaft using nit combs or animal flea combs.
- If the nits are too difficult or sticky to remove, try rinsing the hair with a diluted vinegar and water solution first, to loosen up the nits. Mix equal parts vinegar and water to make the solution. Use this solution as a final hair rinse after each shampoo for 3 weeks.
- Put the nits in a bag, tie it up and throw it out.
- After treatment, check, comb and remove nits and lice from hair every 2 -3 days
- Check all treated persons for 2 to 3 weeks until you are sure all lice and nits are gone..
- All household contacts should be checked for lice and nits every 2 to 3 days for 2 weeks.

3. Cleaning the environment

- Machine wash all washable clothing and bed linens that the infested person touched during the 2 days before treatment. Use the hot water cycle to wash and dry laundry using the hot cycle for at least 20 minutes.
 - Dry clean clothing that is not washable (i.e. coats, hats)
- Store items that cannot be washed or dry cleaned (stuffed animals, comforters, etc.) into a plastic bag and seal for 2 weeks.
- Soak combs and brushes for 1 hour in rubbing alcohol, Lysol, or wash thoroughly with soap and hot water.
- Vacuum the floor and furniture. Do not use fumigant sprays; they can be toxic.

Miscellaneous information

- Itching may continue for several weeks even though the lice are gone.
- Once the treatment is given the child may return to school or daycare.
- Do not use a medicated shampoo more than 3 times
- Children under 1 year old should not be treated with an insecticide, but rather removal of lice and nits one by one manually.
- Do not treat anyone with a head lice product unless you find lice or nits in their hair.
- You may also contact lice removal services in the community.

(Sources: Canadian Pediatric Society, American Academy of Pediatrics, Children's Care Clinic)

Important

The information contained herein, is intended as a guideline and is for educational purposes only. If at anytime you are concerned about the well-being of your child, you should seek a medical opinion either at our office, or at the emergency room of your nearest hospital or the Montreal Children's Hospital.

