

HEAD LICE INFORMATION

Head lice are a common childhood problem and cause considerable disruption for students and their families, but realize that this is a mild health condition without serious health consequences for children.

Head lice cannot be completely eliminated from communities or schools. Neither the occurrence of a case nor an outbreak should be considered as evidence of a breakdown in hygienic practices on the part of individuals, families, or schools.

The most effective point of control of head lice is the household. Parents are best suited to screen their children for head lice and to properly treat and control lice within the household.

Some goals to strive for in dealing with head lice are to minimize the disruptive effects on a child's educational experiences and minimize the stigmatizing impact the child may feel.

Head lice are transmitted through close personal contact with an infested individual. Occasionally, transfer may occur through combs, brushes, hats, and upholstered furniture or bedding which an infested person recently used. Most people have the impression only unclean persons become infested with head lice. This is not true.

Head lice are small, elongated insects about this (-) long and are grayish-brown in color. Lice do not jump or fly, nor do they stay alive for long periods of time off of the human head (typically less than 48 hours).

Because head lice are good at hiding in the hair, an infestation is usually suspected by finding the nits (louse eggs). Nits are teardrop-shaped, about the size of a typewritten comma, and vary in color from yellowish-brown to white. Head lice attach each nit to a hair shaft at the scalp with a waterproof, cement-like substance. Thus, nits cannot be washed or brushed out of the hair like dandruff or other debris resembling nits. Nits are most commonly found on hairs at the nape of the neck and behind the ears, where they are protected from extreme light and temperatures. However, clusters of nits may be found in any area of the hair, requiring examination of the entire head.

Should you detect live lice on your child, it is necessary to begin treatment. All family members should then be also checked. Treatment of other family members is not necessary unless infestation is identified. **Contact your physician before any treatment if you are pregnant or a child is less than 2 years old.** Personal articles that any infested person has worn or used within the previous 2 days should be disinfected. The following treatment procedures should be carried out before your child returns to school:

- 1) Obtain head lice product from your pharmacy. Several medicated shampoos and rinses (pediculicides) are available for head lice. There are over-the-counter products available or prescription products that can be obtained through your physician.
- 2) Apply the product according to the manufacturer, or according to the instructions you receive from your physician or local health department.
- 3) Do not use a cream rinse or combination shampoo/conditioner before using lice medicine. Do not re-wash hair for 1-2 days after treatment.

- 4) Have your child put on clean clothing after treatment.
- 5) Manually remove nits from your child's hair. You can use the comb that comes with the product (metal combs recommended), tweezers, or your fingernails. This is time consuming but it is an important step in getting rid of lice.
- 6) Repeat treatment with the pediculicide after 7-10 days if required. Please check product instructions.

Since heat kills lice and their eggs, many personal articles can be disinfested by machine washing in hot water and/or drying on the hot cycle for at least 20 minutes. Both nits and adults are killed in 10-20 minutes at 125°F. Home hot water heaters keep water at this temperature when the heat selector is set on medium or high. Don't forget about your child's coats, jackets and sweaters.

Articles of clothing and bedding that cannot be washed can be put in a hot dryer for 20 minutes or placed in tightly sealed plastic bags for 14 days. This works well for stuffed animals too. Combs, brushes and similar items can be disinfested by soaking them in rubbing alcohol or Lysol for one hour or soaking them in a pan of soap and 150°F hot water for 5-10 minutes.

Carpets, furniture, etc. do not require special treatment as lice live only about 24 – 48 hours off the head. Normal vacuuming is sufficient treatment of these items. **APPLICATION OF PESTICIDES OR SPRAYS OR FUMIGATION IS NOT NECESSARY.** Use of these products can carry a greater health risk than the lice themselves. There is no need to treat family pets, since lice do not infest animals.

Parents of your child's closest friends must be notified that their child may also be infested. This is particularly important if the children have slept together or participated in activities involving frequent body contact, such as athletics, dance classes, etc. If the friend becomes infested while playing with your child and is not treated, your child may become reinfested from the friend. This also applies to all family members. **TREATMENT DOES NOT PREVENT REINFESTATION.**

Examine your child's hair daily for 10-14 days after first treatment.

Once treated, your child may return to school. Your child's hair and scalp will be examined at that time.

If you have any questions regarding this matter, please feel free to contact the nurse in your child's school.

Resources:

Harvard Public Health <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html>

American Academy of Pediatrics
<http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/pediatrics;110/3/638.pdf>

National Association of School Nurses <http://www.nasn.org/Default.aspx?tabid=237>