

Head Lice Fact Sheet

Head lice are common among children 3-12 years of age. Children in group settings such as child care and schools are at increased risk, because of their habits of frequent head-to-head contact and sharing personal items. Although head lice are a nuisance, they do not transmit infections. Head lice are parasitic insects which live on the scalp. They do not hop, jump, or fly. They crawl from one person to another by direct contact and by use of infested articles such as combs, brushes, hats, scarves, bedding, and upholstery. Having head lice is not a social disgrace, and does not indicate lack of hygiene.

Know the biology of head lice

Understanding the life cycle is an important factor in the management of head lice. Head lice live and breed on the child's hair and scalp and feed on blood. They cannot survive for more than one to two days off of a live host.

1. The female lives up to three to four weeks and lays approximately six eggs (nits) per day. These tiny eggs (appearing as tiny white or dark ovals) are firmly attached to the hair, with a glue-like material, close to the scalp.
2. Young nymphs hatch in about seven days, resembling a small adult.
3. Nymphs molt or shed skin three times to reach the adult stage in about 10 days.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The major symptoms are itching and scratching caused by the bugs and their bites. Continued scratching may lead to open sores and secondary infection.

What methods can be used to treat the infestation?

There are several treatment options available, but before treating, make sure the child has an active case. In fact, the greatest harm associated with head lice is not from the lice, but from well-intentioned yet misguided use of toxic chemicals to eliminate the lice.

Chemical methods

- **Shampoos** containing permethrin or pyrethrins are popular over the counter treatments, but because of resistance these treatments may no longer be effective. They do not kill the eggs and a second treatment is needed about 10 days later to kill the newly-hatched lice.
- **Lindan** is approved by the Food and Drug Administration, but not recommended because of widespread resistance and side effects including neurotoxicity.
- **Malathion** is currently recommended as a chemical choice for the treatment of head lice in children. It is not approved for use by children younger than 6 years old, and is available only by prescription.

Non chemical methods

- **Mechanical removal** of lice and nits can be an effective method. This is time-consuming, but safest for young children. Use a nit comb, a good light (sunlight is best), and magnification, since nits are small and hard to see.
- **Haircuts** make the search for lice and eggs easier.

- **Heat** from the ordinary hand-held air dryers may be sufficient to kill the lice and their eggs.
- **Alternative treatments** involving the use of herbal shampoos, mayonnaise, food grade oils, kerosene and hair gels are not proven to be effective.

Selection and use of treatment products are very important. The remedy for head lice should be based on life cycle, resistance and safety considerations. Please contact your doctor for specific treatments for your child. The Sangamon County Department of Public Health also offers free head lice checks. Please contact them for information on this service.

After treatment

- Change and wash all sheets, pillowcases and blankets in **hot**, soapy water and machine dry at hot setting.
- Wash all previously worn clothes, coats, hats with **hot**, soapy water. Dry in **hot** dryer.
- Dry clean clothes that cannot be washed.
- Wash all combs, brushes, barrettes, ribbons with head lice shampoo (soak for at least 10 min.), or boil for 10 min.
- Vacuum all floors, chairs, couches, mattresses to remove hidden nits.
- Place all stuffed animals and other articles that can not be put in the dryer in tightly sealed plastic bags for 10-14 days.

Steps to help avoid head lice infestation

- Do NOT share hats, coats, headgear, combs or brushes.
- Inspect your child's hair weekly for presence of lice and nits.
- Treat promptly if you find lice/nits.
- Notify your child's school if you find lice/nits. **This call is completely confidential**, and necessary in order for us to properly initiate the "After Treatment" procedures, we must be informed of the infestation.