

Head Lice

FACT SHEET



Washtenaw County
Health Department

What are head lice?

Head lice are very small blood sucking insects that must live on a person to survive. Head lice are not a health hazard and are not known to spread disease.

Head lice and nits are most commonly found on the scalp, behind the ears, and near the neckline at the back of the head. It is difficult to see live lice on a head; typically, only nits are seen. Head lice are rarely found on the body, eyelashes, or eyebrows.

Head lice need a blood meal every few hours in addition to the warmth and humidity of the human scalp to survive. They can live up to 30 days on a person. When off the human body, they cannot survive for more than 2 days.

Head lice are spread through direct head-to-head contact. Lice do not have wings and do not hop, jump, or fly. Head lice are specific to humans. You can get human lice only from other humans. You cannot give your pets lice.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Lice in hair (alive or dead)
- Nits on hair shafts
- Itchy scalp
- Tickling sensation
- Trouble sleeping and irritability (lice are more active at night and may disrupt sleep)

How is it spread?

- Direct contact with a person who has lice. Head to head contact is common for children during play.
- Wearing clothes or using combs or brushes that were previously used by a person who has lice.
- Lying on carpets, bedding, or couches previously used by a person who has lice.

Head lice life cycle:

Eggs: Nits are head lice eggs laid by the adult female. They are hard to see and are often confused for dandruff or hair spray droplets. Nits attach to the base of the hair shaft close to the scalp. Live eggs are usually found within ¼ inch of the scalp. Nits are about the size of a knot of thread, are oval in shape, and are usually yellow to white. Nits take about 1 week to hatch.

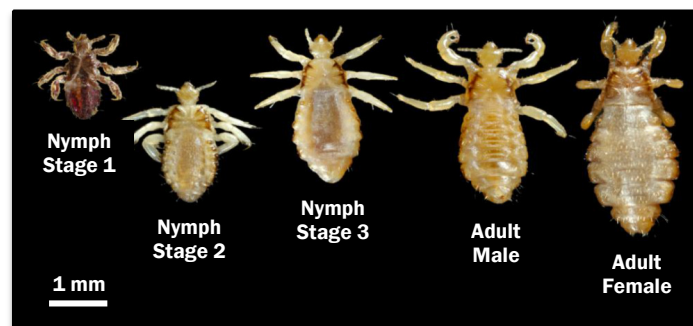


Head lice egg (nit)

(Shown larger than actual size)
Image: Centers for Disease Control/James Gathany

Nymphs: The nit hatches to release a nymph. The nit shell then becomes a more visible dull yellow color and stays attached to the hair shaft. The nymph looks like an adult head louse, but is about the size of a pinhead. Nymphs go through 3 stages of growth and become adults about 8-12 days after hatching.

Adults: An adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed. It has 6 legs (each with claws) and is tan to grayish-white. In persons with dark hair, the louse will appear darker. Females are usually larger than males, and can lay up to 8 nits a day.



Nymph and adult stages of head lice

(Shown larger than actual size)
Image: Centers for Disease Control/James Gathany

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.

How is it treated?

Lice may be treated on your own without having to go to the doctor. Head lice treatment shampoos and cream rinses can be purchased at any pharmacy. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for treatment recommendations. Do not apply the lice treatment to a child younger than the age recommended on the product label. Pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers should check with their healthcare provider before treating themselves or others. Be sure to read and follow all instructions included with the lice treatment product.

General treatment guidelines:

- Check the hair and scalp of all family members for lice and nits.
- Once lice are confirmed, choose which treatment option may be best for you and your family.
- Apply the shampoo or cream rinse treatment following the product instructions.
- Use a fine-toothed lice comb to manually remove lice and nits. Inspect and comb through the hair, one small section at a time. Remove any nits using the comb, fingernails, or by cutting the strands of hair. The more lice and nits that are combed from the hair, the faster the infestation will be resolved.
- Combing can be repeated daily until no lice or nits are found.
- Continue to look for lice or nits for 2-3 weeks.
- A second treatment may be needed in 7-10 days. Follow the product instructions.
- One week after the second treatment, do a final check to see if there are any new nits close to the scalp.
- Head lice treatment centers are also an option.

What about school?

Immediate removal of a child from school due to head lice is not necessary. A child with lice has probably been infested for weeks. Prompt removal of the child could lead to embarrassment and ridicule. The child can be sent home at the end of the day and should be allowed to ride the bus. The school should notify the child's parents directly. The child's parents should complete treatment before returning the child to school.

Ridding lice from the home:

- Wash all clothing, bedding, and towels used in the 2 days prior to treatment in hot water for at least 10 minutes, and dry on high heat in a dryer for at least 30 minutes.
- Options for clothing and other articles that cannot be washed: dry-cleaning, putting articles in the dryer on high for 30 minutes, or putting items in a tightly sealed bag for 14 days at room temperature or for 24 hours at below freezing temperatures.
- Combs, brushes, curlers and hair ornaments should be soaked for one hour in water hotter than 130 degrees Fahrenheit for 5-10 minutes. If items cannot be washed, place in a tightly sealed bag for 14 days at room temperature or for 24 hours at below freezing temperatures.
- Pillows, upholstered furniture, mattresses, carpets, rugs, and cloth car seats should be vacuumed thoroughly. A lint roller can also be used to clean items.
- Lice sprays are not recommended. They are very toxic and not necessary.

How is it prevented?

Head lice is most often spread by direct contact, usually with a close friend or relative. Prevent head lice by avoiding head-to-head contact with a person who has lice.

Although transmission of head lice through indirect contact or through objects is possible, it is rare. Avoid sharing bedding or personal items such as combs, brushes, hair ornaments, scarves, or hats with a person who has head lice.

For more information on head lice visit:

www.michigan.gov/headlice

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