

What are head lice?

Head lice are small parasitic insects that reside on the scalp of a human host and feed off the host's capillary blood through the scalp from every few hours to once a day. The life cycle of adult head lice is from 23 to 30 days. The female louse lays approximately ten eggs (nits) per day or as many as 400 eggs in its lifespan. When the eggs are released, a cement-like substance is also released, allowing the egg to stick to the hair shaft within 6 mm of the scalp. The nits are laid close to the scalp because body heat is needed to incubate the eggs. Since scalp hair grows about 0.4 millimeters a day for most people, the distance from the scalp to the outermost nit will give you a rough index to how long the infestation has been present: 4 millimeters, about 10 days; 8 millimeters, about three weeks; 1 inch, maybe two months. The eggs hatch in 10 to 14 days; the lice take another 9 to 12 days until they mature to adult size, about the size of a sesame seed. The color of the louse can vary from tan to gray. Nits are the eggshell casings of the lice eggs and are about 1 mm long. It is difficult to tell if the nits contain developing embryos or if they are empty casings, so be sure to remove them all. (Sources: School Nursing by J. Selekman; 11/1/05 Slate article by Sydney Spiesel, MD)

Head lice, unlike other lice, are not associated with disease transmission or with one's hygiene. They have no wings and cannot fly or jump between individuals; they can only crawl. The primary mode of transmission is direct head-to-head contact (think sleepovers). Please check your child's scalp and hair if you see him/her scratching frequently, especially after sleepovers and campouts.

My child has head lice, what do I do next?

IF YOU FIND NITS OR HEAD LICE, use either a pediculicide lice shampoo or do an oil treatment.

- Oil treatment: saturate hair with olive oil (some people add tea tree oil to olive oil), cover with shower cap, leave on at least 4 hours, repeat every four days for three weeks to coincide with life cycle of louse. See information about the olive oil treatment at www.headlicetodeadlice.com With the olive oil treatment, you don't have to be concerned about toxicity or the resistance of head lice to a pediculicide. Remove all nits daily. This takes a lot of time; be sure not to skip a day.
- Lice shampoo: use according to the directions on the package. Be aware the nits are markedly more resistant to lice shampoos than are the adults, so it's essential they be removed manually.
 - Comb the hair into one-inch sections and remove the nits with a metal nit comb or by hand with your fingernails. You can buy over-the-counter products which make nit removal easier.
 - Soak combs/brushes in pediculicide lice shampoo or hot water. Teach your child not to share combs or brushes.
 - Change and wash all sheets, pillowcases, and blankets in hot water and machine dry on hot setting to kill the lice and nits. Wash all previously worn clothes, coats, hats.
 - Vacuum rugs, carpets, upholstered furniture, car upholstery.
 - Pillows, stuffed animals or non-washable items must be either dry cleaned, washed, sealed in a plastic bag for seven days or placed in a dryer for 20 minutes of hot air.
 - Keep doing all of the above until you find no more nits. It can be a great deal of work depending upon how long your child has had an infestation and how many family members are affected. Be sure to have your child help with all the extra housework and don't get discouraged.