

Fact Sheet

HEAD LICE

(Pediculosis Capitis)

What are head lice?

Head lice are parasitic insects found on human heads. Adult head lice are hard to see. They are gray or brown in color and about the size of a sesame seed. Their eggs, called nits, are easier to find. Nits are tan or off-white in color. The nits may at first look to you like dandruff, but you will find that the nits are very firmly stuck to the strands of hair. Nits will not flake off or wash off like dandruff.

The life cycle of a louse begins with the nit. Nits hatch after 7 to 10 days. Approximately 8 to 14 days after hatching, the louse is mature and lays eggs. An adult louse lives for about one month. Head lice can live away from the human head for as long as 2 days.

Head lice do not jump or fly. They do not come from or live on animals.

Head lice are not a sign of poor hygiene or uncleanliness. ANYONE can get head lice!

How do you get head lice?

You can get head lice by:

- Direct contact with a person with head lice—head touching head.
- Sharing items with a person who has head lice—things like combs, brushes, hats, head bands, scarves, barrettes, hair ribbons.
- Using items a person with head lice
 - Has used; like upholstered furniture, car seats, bus seats, theater seats, pillows, towels, coats, sweaters, wigs. Head lice can also be spread in shared lockers and coat racks if you put your clothes onto those of someone who has head lice.
 - Has lain on; like rugs, beds, cots, sleeping bags.
 - Has played with; like stuffed toys, “dress up” clothes.

How do you know if you have head lice?

These are some things to look for:

- Itching of the head or feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Scratches, sores, or rash on the head or neck. Sometimes these sores get infected.
- Nits on the hair strands. It may help you see the nits if you have good lighting and use a magnifying glass. Nits may be found throughout the hair but are most commonly at the back of the head and behind the ears.

What if I find lice on my child's head?

If live lice are found, the child should be treated. If one person in a family or group has head lice, it is possible that others will have it. Everyone should be checked, and all those who have lice should be treated at the same time. Treatment means:

- Using a lice treatment on the hair recommended by your pharmacist or doctor. There are a number of approved lice treatments that can be used to get rid of head lice. Some of these treatments you can get over the counter (just tell the pharmacist what you need), and some must be ordered by a doctor. Washing with regular shampoo will not get rid of head lice. **Before using any of these head lice treatments, read all the directions and follow them exactly.**
- Removing all nits.
- Cleaning things the person with head lice has used or worn.

Some lice treatments will need to be used again in 10 days. If there are live lice after the second treatment, call your child's health care provider. **Do not treat a child more than twice without your doctor's advice.**

What if I only find nits on my child's head?

It is not generally recommended that children with nits alone be treated. You may choose to consult with your child's health care provider or school nurse. Best care for a child with nits includes the following:

- Screening the child's head daily for two weeks for evidence of live lice. If lice are seen, the child should be treated as described above.

- Using a lice comb to remove nits. Since nits are eggs, it is possible that an egg remaining on the head may hatch. While most head lice treatments kill many eggs, as many as 30% of eggs can still hatch after treatment. Therefore, removing the eggs is the best way to ensure they will not hatch.
- Monitoring your child to be sure new nits are not appearing. If new nits are seen, it is likely that there is a louse on the child's head and treatment may be indicated. If this occurs, you should consult with your child's school nurse or health care provider.

What do I do about cleaning my house?

Head lice do not live off the body for very long, but it is still important to perform some simple steps to be sure a louse in the house does not return to a child's head. Items to clean include:

- Hair products (combs, brushes, barrettes) should be soaked in boiling water for 5-10 minutes.
- Bedding, towels and clothing used by the affected person(s) should be washed in hot water and dry in a hot dryer.
- Nonwashable items (stuffed animals, pillows, clothes that require dry-cleaning) that come into direct contact with the affected person(s) should be stored in a plastic bag for two weeks.
- The floor and furniture where the affect person(s) usually sits should be vacuumed.

There is no need to have your home or school fumigated for head lice. In fact, spraying or fumigating has been found in some cases to be harmful to small children and pets.

What can I do to be sure my child doesn't get head lice again?

Because head lice are common, there is no guarantee that a child will not get them more than once. Following the steps described above will ensure that the current case goes away. To reduce the chances of your child being affected again, take the following steps:

- Notify your child's school nurse, school principal or child care director of any case of head lice. This allows the school or child care center to screen your child's close friends and playmates and their siblings, as appropriate.
- Notify the parents of your child's close friends and playmates so they can screen their child.

- Remove all nits!
- Teach your child to avoid behaviors that increase the risk of contracting head lice, such as head to head contact during play and sharing clothing, brushes, combs, or towels.

Have questions?

Call the Baltimore County Department of Health at 410-887-2718 or Baltimore County Public Schools at 410-887-6368, Monday through Friday, between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.