

Head Lice Fact Sheet

Head Lice

- Head lice are tiny, flat insects that live and breed on the scalp where they lay their eggs
- Head lice bite the scalp and feed on blood several times a day
- Head lice DO NOT spread disease but they are a nuisance
- Anyone can get head lice and it is not your fault if you do; having head lice does not mean you are not clean
- Head lice are most common among school-aged children and people who are in close contact



What do head lice look like?

Lice have 3 stages of life- the egg (nit), the baby lice (nymph) and the adult lice (mature louse).

Nits:

- Attach to the hair shaft very close to the scalp
- The size of a grain of sand
- Brownish in colour when alive, white when dead or hatched
- Nits MORE than 1cm from the scalp are dead or hatched
- Unlike dandruff, nits do not come off the hair easily
- Nits hatch into nymphs in 9-10 days
- You cannot “catch” nits, they have to be laid by a female louse



Nymphs:

- Baby lice that look like adults but smaller, they are considered immature louse
- A nymph must feed on blood to live

Adult Lice:

- Tiny insects, about the size of a sesame seed
- Greyish-brown in colour, but they can appear darker in dark hair
- They can move fast by crawling, but do NOT jump, fly, or swim
- Female louse lay 3-10 nits per day
- Can live up to 30 days

How do they spread?

- Lice are spread through direct head-to-head contact or indirectly by sharing items like hats, helmets, hair brushes, combs, accessories, pillows, or towels recently used by someone with head lice

- They are different than the lice that live on cats and dogs, and are not transmitted from animals
- Head lice are transmitted most easily between people who spend lots of time together like campers and camp staff

How do you know you have head lice?

- Itchy scalp (though this is not always the case)
- Feeling like something is moving in the hair
- Sores on the head caused by scratching – this can lead to infection in some cases
- Irritability

Where to look?

Lice and nits are usually found close to the scalp, especially around the ears, at the base of the neck and along the forehead. To confirm a case of head lice, you need to find LIVE LICE. Children may have anywhere from 10-20 live lice. If you only find nits in a person's hair, they may not have head lice.

- Ensure good lighting when checking for lice
- Part hair into small sections to help you see lice and nits better
- If lice and nits are present, act quickly and treat both



Treating head lice

Head lice treatment:

Start a lice treatment if live lice are found or if nits are less than 1 cm from the scalp, Head lice treatments do not require an Rx. Your local pharmacist is a good resource when deciding which treatment to use. Most products require two treatments. The first will kill all the lice but not all the nits. The second treatment, done 7-10 days after the first, will kill the nits that have hatched into nymphs. Daily nit removal and hair combing are essential to getting rid of head lice successfully. If you see live lice 48 hours after the second treatment, contact your physician.

Nit treatment:

Daily nit removal and hair combing are keys to getting rid of head lice. After head lice are treated, removing the nits can help to prevent a new infestation. Even with careful nit picking, some can be missed. There is no reason that children should be excluded from activities because of nits. To remove nits, part hair into small sections and use a fine-toothed nit comb or your fingernails to pull the nits from the hair strands. Work from root to tip of hair. Wipe the nits onto a tissue and place in a bag for disposal. After treatment, wash your hands and the comb with soap and water and soak the comb in hot water for 10 min.

There are many products available to treat head lice. In Canada, there are 2 approved insecticide treatments: **Pyrethrin** (found in R&C shampoo + conditioner) and **Permethrin** (found in Nix Cream Rinse or Kwellada-P Cream Rinse) & 3 approved non-insecticide treatments: **Isopropyl Myristate/Cyclomethicone** (found in Resultz), **Silicone Oil Dimeticone** (found in NYDA) and **Benzyl Alcohol Lotion 5%** (found in Ulesfia). For any

treatment, always follow the package instructions carefully as there may be contraindications based on age or medical condition. If there is any uncertainty, always consult with a physician before using any of the listed products.



There is no evidence that home remedies and other treatments work to treat head lice. While some products like petroleum jelly or tea tree oil may make it hard for lice to breathe, they likely won't kill them.

Does a camper or staff member with head lice have to leave camp?

- Remember, lice are very common among children and people in close proximity but they do not spread disease. Lice are a nuisance and unpleasant, but they are not dangerous
- If lice are found, it is important to treat this person right away. Once treated, they can get back to camp life as usual
- It is also important to check all close contacts of the person who has lice. An untreated source among cabin mates and staff is a common reason for getting head lice again
- Don't forget to **take care of the camper and staff**: provide reassurance, comfort and support. Normalize the situation; be aware of your body language, reaction and choice of words. Provide health teaching about lice, dispel the myths and reinforce the facts



What types of camp protocol should be in place for head lice?

- Good practice might entail checking all incoming campers and staff for head lice
- Remind everyone in your camp community to avoid head-to-head contact as well as sharing hats, helmets, accessories, brushes, combs, bedding, towels, etc.
- Communicate with parents and guardians if there is an incidence of lice- there are many sample letters available to use on the internet
- Ensure camp items like helmets are cleaned between campers if sharing is required (best practice is to vacuum and then wipe out, removable foam padding can be washed)

- On the day head lice treatment is started, use very hot water and machine wash clothing, towels, linens that were used in the last 3 days, then dry them on high heat for at least 15 minutes
- Items that cannot be washed can be placed in an airtight plastic bag for 2 weeks or placed in a freezer for 48 hours
- Don't forget to clean combs, brushes and hair accessories with hot, soapy water until all lice are removed- then soak in hot water for 10 minutes
- There is not a huge need for extensive environmental cleaning as lice do not live for long off the scalp

References:

All images came from Google image search, March 2019.

Canadian Paediatric Society, https://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/head_lice, Head Lice Fact Sheet, September 2016.

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