

What To Do If Your Child Has Head Lice

What are lice?

Head lice are tiny insects that feed on the human blood. Lice are about as big as sesame seeds and live on the human scalp. Some parents say that lice look like fleas. However, lice cannot jump or fly and they do not live on animals. They are easily passed around on shared combs, brushes, hats, or direct head-to-head contact. Anyone can get head lice. It has nothing to do with being unclean. The sooner lice are detected and treated, the easier it is to get rid of them.

What are nits?

Nits are lice eggs. They are yellowish-brown to white and are teardrop shaped. They may look like dandruff. Nits are attached to hair with a waterproof glue-like substance that can't be washed out or blown away. They must be removed even after using the lice shampoo. Nits hatch in about one week and can start laying eggs in 9-12 days.

Are there any symptoms with having head lice?

The most common symptom of lice is itching. Although itching is not always present, it occurs when lice bite and suck blood from the scalp, which causes the immune system response. This may take several weeks to develop so that by the time itching occurs, the child may have many lice.

How do I check my child's head for lice?

Head lice may be hard to locate because they move quickly and shy away from light. Their eggs are easier to see. Begin by separating the hair and examining small sections at a time. Under bright, natural light, closely examine the scalp for small white or yellowish-brown specks attached to the hair near the scalp. Try to brush the specks away with your finger. If they are not easily removed, they are probably nits.

What does the school do?

The school requests that all parents frequently check their child's head for lice. The school also does classroom checks. It is against school policy for a child to come to school with head lice. If your child is found to have head lice we will contact you to come and get your child so that treatment can begin. After you have treated your child and removed the nits, your child can come back to school. **They will be reinspected** and released to class if **NO** lice or nits are seen.

How to Treat Your Child for Head Lice

Step 1: Shampooing

When you go to the drug store to buy the special shampoo you will notice that there are basically three types to choose from. One kind you will apply now. It washes out of the hair and will need to be reapplied in 7-10 days. Another type leaves residual chemicals on the hair and will not need to be reapplied unless the child remains infested. The third type is a prescription and must be prescribed by your doctor. Whichever type you choose, it is extremely important to follow the instructions closely. Some treatments must be put on dry hair and others need the hair to be damp.

Determine how many bottles you will need by the number of people in your family and how long the hair is. Everyone in the family, except babies, should be treated at the same time. A person with shoulder length hair may require two bottles. A person with very long or thick hair may require three bottles. The lice will not be killed if you don't use enough shampoo. Although this can be an expensive investment, it will still be cheaper to do a thorough job the first time than having to repeat the treatments month after month.

Step 2: Removing the nits

This may be the most important step you can take to rid your child of lice and preventing reinfestation.

You have already shampooed your child. The shampoo is fairly effective in killing the hatched lice, although no shampoo is 100% effective. They are less effective at killing the eggs. Although this is extremely time consuming and will take more than one day, this step is extremely important. It may be easier to start by combing through the hair with a regular comb to remove any tangles. Then using the comb provided with the treatment, you will section the hair into small sections- 1" or less at a time. Place the comb at the scalp and comb to the ends. If the eggs will not dislodge, you may need to use your fingernails and pull them out by hand. Repeat this process with each section.

Repeat this process every day for at least three weeks to find any stray lice or eggs that may have been missed. One missed egg can cause a reinfestation. Although the treatments include a plastic comb, some parents have reported better results using a metal comb. The metal combs can be found at Family Drug / CVS / Wal-Mart. A regular comb will not work. Also one can use a solution of one part vinegar and one part water applied to the hair to help loosen the eggs. If you are using the treatment that is applied to dry hair you will need to use the vinegar after the treatment. If you are using a treatment where you shampoo with regular shampoo (example: Prell) first, then use the vinegar before applying the treatment. Do not use a conditioner, it only coats the hair shaft and allows the comb to slip over the lice eggs. One can use a detangler spray such as Johnson & Johnson No More Tangles or everyday combing.

Step 3: Cleaning the environment

All personal head gear (hats, helmets, headbands etc.) scarves, coats, towels, and bed linens should be cleaned by machine washing in hot water and then dried using the hot cycle of a dryer for at least 20 minutes.

Clothing, bedspreads, blankets, pillows, or stuffed animals that cannot be washed should be dry-cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag for a period of two weeks.

Personal combs and brushes should be cleaned by soaking in hot water (above 130 degrees) for 5 to 10 minutes.

All rooms, carpeting and furniture used by the infested person should be thoroughly vacuumed (burn the sweeper bag or dump the collection cup into a plastic bag that can be sealed, clean the cup with Lysol solution (¼ cup **concentrated** Lysol to 1 gallon of water.) Also after cleaning all surfaces, wipe them down with a rag dampened with the Lysol solution (rinsing often). Remembering, to also wipe down the bathroom, especially in the warmer areas with the Lysol solution. Lice can live up to 48 hours on a warm surface (ex: counter top where towels might lay).

Don't forget the car! Vacuum and wipe down car upholstery and car seats with the Lysol solution.

Some "old wives tales"

There has been some speculation that applying petroleum jelly or mayonnaise to the hair and leaving it on overnight may "smother" lice. This has **not** yet been proven to be effective and is quite messy. Therefore, The Jackson County Health Department is not recommending this treatment. Also, scrubbing the head to get the petroleum jelly out may irritate the head.

Also **not effective** and extremely dangerous is the folk remedy of applying gasoline or kerosene. Children have been killed or maimed when the volatile fumes accidentally ignite.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact the Jackson County Health Department at 522-6667. Your doctor is also a good resource. We will do everything possible to protect your children. We appreciate your attention and hard work.