

Head Lice... More Signs, Symptoms and Treatment

Signs of Head Lice

Lice eggs (called nits). These look like tiny yellow, tan, or brown dots before they hatch. After hatching, the remaining shell looks white or clear. Lice lay nits on hair shafts close to the skin's surface, where the temperature is perfect for keeping warm until they hatch. Nits look sort of like dandruff, only they can't be removed by brushing or shaking them off. Unless the infestation is heavy, it's more common to see nits in a child's hair than it is to see live lice crawling on the scalp. Lice eggs hatch within 1 to 2 weeks after they're laid.

Adult lice and nymphs (baby lice). The adult louse is no bigger than a sesame seed and is grayish-white or tan. Nymphs are smaller and become adult lice about 1 to 2 weeks after they hatch.

Scratching. With lice bites come itching and scratching. However, the itching may not always start right away — that depends on how sensitive your child's skin is to the lice. It can sometimes take weeks for kids with lice to start scratching. They may complain, though, of things moving around on or tickling their heads.

Small, red bumps or sores from scratching. For some kids, the irritation is mild; for others, a more bothersome rash may develop. Excessive scratching can lead to a bacterial infection (the skin would become red and tender and may have crusting and oozing along with swollen lymph glands). If your doctor thinks this is the case, he or she may treat the infection with an oral antibiotic.

You may be able to see the lice or nits by parting your child's hair into small sections and checking for lice and nits on the scalp, behind the ears, and around the nape of the neck. A magnifying glass and bright light may help. But it can be tough to find a nymph or adult louse — often, there aren't many of them and they're able to move fast.

Are Lice Contagious?

Though they can't fly or jump, these tiny parasites have specially adapted claws that allow them to crawl and cling firmly to hair, they spread mainly through head-to-head contact. Occasionally, sharing clothing, bed linens, combs, brushes, and hats can also help pass them along. Kids are most prone to catching lice because they tend to have close physical contact with each other and often share personal items.

Treatment

There are many over-the-counter (OTC) or prescription medications, depending on what treatments have already been tried. Medicated lice treatments usually kill the lice but it may take a few days for the itching to stop.

It's important to follow the directions exactly because these products are insecticides. Applying too much medication or too frequently can increase the risk of causing harm. Following the directions on the product label is also important to ensure that the treatment works properly.

A new alternative to shampoos and nit combing is a product many parents have found successful: **Robicomb**, made by LiceGuard. This is an electronic comb that uses a single AA battery to detect and kill lice. Besides being easy to use, it is non-toxic and can be used for the whole family. Please contact me for information or a demo if interested in using this product.

Keep in mind that head lice don't survive long once they fall off a person. So it's unnecessary to spend a great deal of time and money trying to rid the house of lice.

Here are some simple ways to get rid of the lice and their eggs, and help prevent a lice reinfestation:

- Wash bed linens and clothing that's been recently in contact by the person with lice in very hot water (130° Fahrenheit), then put them in the hot cycle of the dryer for at least 20 minutes.
- Dry clean any clothing that isn't machine washable.
- Linens, clothing, stuffed animals, book bags, etc. that cannot be washed or dry-cleaned may be put in airtight bags for 2 weeks.
- Vacuum carpets and any upholstered furniture (in your home or car).
- Wash hair-care items like combs, barrettes, hair ties or bands, headbands, and brushes as directed above.
- DO NOT USE room sprays or hire a pest control company to try to get rid of the lice, as they can be harmful.

Preventing Lice

You *can* help to prevent your child from getting lice — or from becoming re-infested with lice — by taking the following precautions:

- Tell kids to try to avoid head-to-head contact at school (in gym, on the playground, or during sports), at sleep overs, and while playing at home with other children.
- Tell kids not to share combs, brushes, hats, scarves, bandanas, ribbons, barrettes, hair ties or bands, towels, helmets, or other personal care items with anyone else.
- Once a week, examine your child's scalp for signs of lice.

Will They Ever Be Gone?

As many parents know firsthand, lice infestation can be a persistent nuisance, especially in group settings. If you feel like you're following every recommendation and your child still has lice, it may be because:

- there are still some lice or nits left behind
- the treatment you're using isn't effective

Contact your school nurse or your physician if you need assistance/have questions with preventing and/or treating head lice.