



CALHOUN COUNTY

Public Health Department

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Fact Sheet

Head Lice

What are head lice?

The head louse, or *Pediculus humanus capitis*, is a parasitic insect that can be found on the head, eyebrows, and eyelashes of people. The parasite can grow to 2-3 mm long and move through the head by crawling. Head lice live close to the human scalp and attach their eggs to the base of the hairline. Head lice are not known to spread disease.

Head lice come in three forms: 1) nits are lice eggs laid at the base of the hair shaft nearest the scalp; 2) nymphs are immature lice that hatch from the nits; 3) adults are fully grown and are about the size of a sesame seed.

How common are head lice?

Head lice are found worldwide. In the United States, infestation with head lice is most common among preschool children attending childcare, elementary school children, and the household members of infested children. It is estimated that 6 million to 12 million infestations occur each year in the United States among children ages 3-11.

Head lice are less common among Black/African American individuals because the claws of the head louse are better adapted to grasping the shape and width of other races' hair shafts.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice move by crawling; they cannot hop or fly. Head lice are spread by direct contact with the hair of an infected person. Anyone who comes in head-to-head contact with someone who already has head lice is at risk. Although uncommon, head lice can be spread by contact with clothing or

other personal items. Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with getting head lice.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

Head lice can be asymptomatic during the first infestation or when the infestation is light. It may take 4–6 weeks for itching to appear after infestation began.

Common symptoms include:

- Tickling feeling of something moving throughout the hair
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the head louse bites
- Irritability and difficulty sleeping as head louse are most active in the dark
- Sores on the head caused by scratching

How is a head lice infestation diagnosed?

Head lice infestation is diagnosed by finding a live nymph or adult louse on the scalp or hair of a person. Because they are very small, move quickly, and avoid light, they can be difficult to find. The use of a magnifying glass and a fine-toothed comb may be helpful. The presence of nits does not always mean that a person has an active infestation but should be treated.

A diagnosis of head lice should be made by a health care provider, school nurse, or other person trained to identify live head lice.

What is the treatment for head lice?

Once a diagnosis of head lice is made there are either over-the-counter medications or prescription medications available. All household members and other close contacts of the infected person should be checked as well. All who are infected should be treated at the same time.

- Over-the-counter medications are available without a prescription at a local drug store or pharmacy. Each over-the-counter product approved for the treatment of head lice contains one of the following active ingredients: pyrethrins or permethrin. Follow all instructions when using the medication.
- The two medications are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of head lice and are available only by prescription: Malathion lotion 0.5% and benzyl alcohol lotion 5%.

This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

If, after 8–12 hours of treatment, no dead lice are found and lice seem as active as before, the medicine may not be working. Do not retreat until speaking with your health care provider; a different pediculicide may be necessary.

Do not use a combination shampoo/conditioner, or conditioner before using lice medication, and do not rewash hair for 1 to 2 days following the medication.

Do not use extra amounts of any lice medication unless instructed to do so by your physician and pharmacist. The drugs used to treat lice are insecticides and can be dangerous if they are misused or overused.

Do not treat an infested person more than 2 to 3 times with the same medication if it does not seem to be working. This may be caused by using the medicine incorrectly or by resistance to the medicine. Always seek the advice of your health care provider if this should happen. He/she may recommend an alternative medication.

Do not use different head lice drugs at the same time unless instructed to do so by your physician and pharmacist.

An alternate natural option: Put olive oil (even cheap dollar store oil will work) all over your hair and wear it under a shower cap overnight. Comb it in the morning to remove nits and lice and then wash. Repeat every three days for a couple of weeks to ensure that all nits and lice have been removed.

How can head lice be prevented?

Avoid head-to-head contact during play and other activities at home, school, and elsewhere.

Lice are spread most commonly by direct hair-to-hair contact and much less frequently by sharing clothing or belongings onto which lice or nits may have crawled or fallen. Head lice survive less than 48 hours if they fall off a person and cannot feed.

Avoid sharing clothing or hair accessories. Disinfect combs and brushes used by an infested person with hot water for 5–10 minutes.

Although the following are not necessary to prevent reinfestation, it is commonly practiced. Machine wash and dry all bedding or seal in a plastic bag and store for two weeks. Vacuum the floor and furniture.

How do I get more information on head lice?

Calhoun County Public Health Department

Phone: 269-969-6383

 www.facebook.com/CCPublicHealthDepartment/

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Phone: 800-232-4636 (800-CDC-INFO)

Website: www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/index.html

Spanish: www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/es/index.html

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Updated 9/2023