

Head Lice Symptoms and Control

"Your Child and Head Lice" These words are heard frequently at this time of year.

Head lice is an upsetting problem that is rapidly growing across our nation. ANYONE, ANYWHERE, can get head lice. The National Pediculosis Association says that with the exception of the common cold, head lice affect more school-aged children than all other childhood communicable diseases combined.

What are head lice? The lice are blood-sucking insects about the size of a sesame seed. Usually they are a light brown but the color can vary. Unlike fleas, they cannot jump. Neither can they fly.

How are head lice spread? They are transmitted most commonly by direct contact with the head of an infested person or by wearing or trying on infested clothing and accessories or using an infested comb or brush. That's why children should be warned against sharing hats, scarves, hair ribbons or grooming aids with others. Bed linens, cushions, and head rests on furniture backs are additional sources of contamination.

Where are lice found? Because lice need to bite and suck blood to live, itching is usually the first symptom of infestation. Head lice and nits (eggs) are most commonly found at the nape of the neck and behind the ears, although all areas of the head should be examined. Lice move quickly and often nits are all that are seen. The nits are particularly troublesome since these even tinier, translucent globules are firmly bonded to the hair shaft by a sticky cement-like substance.

Treatment. Lice shampoo available over the counter or from your doctor, will kill most of the adult lice by only a portion of the eggs. Any that remains alive and hatch can start the infestation all over again. An adult louse may lay up to 200 eggs that hatch within a week. That's why treating head lice requires extraordinary measures and a lot of patience. Every family member should be examined and any one with evidence of lice, treated at the same time. A second treatment must be applied in 7-10 days. Taking time to remove the nits from the hair is very beneficial. To help dissolve the cement substance holding the nits, soak the hair for several minutes before shampooing. Use a solution of 1/2 vinegar and 1/2 water or alcohol full strength. To remove the nits, use a fine-tooth comb or tweezers. Nit combing is best done when the hair is dry or slightly damp.

After treating the hair the following must be done:

Wash all combs and brushes in very hot soapy water for 10 minutes (put in washer with bed linens).

Wash in hot water all clothing and bed linens that have been in contact with the infested person in the last 3 days. Dry them at least 20 minutes using high heat.

Vacuum or dry clean items that can't be washed. Anything that can't be cleaned or vacuumed should be sealed in a plastic bag for 10 days.

Finally, do a nit check for the next 2-3 weeks. If new nits or lice appear repeat treatment. Do not treat on basis of itching only, the treatment can cause itching.