

HEAD LICE (PEDICULOSIS)

What are Head Lice (Pediculosis)?

Pediculosis is an infestation of head lice on the hair of the head. The lice feed on human blood that can cause severe local itching. Adult head lice are roughly 2–3 mm long. Head lice infest the head and neck and attach their eggs to the base of the hair shaft. Lice move by crawling; they cannot hop or fly. Head lice infestation, or pediculosis, is spread most commonly by close person-to-person contact. Dogs, cats, and other pets do not play a role in the transmission of human lice.



How are Head Lice Transmitted?

In the United States, infestation with head lice is most common among pre-school children attending child care, elementary schoolchildren, and the household members of infested children. Head lice are spread by direct contact with the hair of an infested person. Anyone who comes in head-to-head contact with someone who already has head lice is at greatest risk. Although uncommon, lice can be spread by contact with clothing (such as hats, scarves, coats) or other personal items (such as combs, brushes, or towels) used by an infested person. Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with getting head lice.

Symptoms of Head Lice

It may take 2-3 weeks for a person to notice the intense itching associated with pediculosis. Lice can be spread as long as they remain alive on the infested person or their clothing. Unattached to the body and without a blood meal, head lice survive for approximately 6-24 hours.

Symptoms include:

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of the head louse.
- Irritability and difficulty sleeping; head lice are most active in the dark.
- Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected with bacteria found on the person's skin.

How to Treat Head Lice?

Treatment for head lice is recommended for persons diagnosed with an active infestation. All household members and other close contacts should be checked and treated if there is evidence of an active infestation. Some experts recommend prophylactic treatment for persons who share the same bed with someone who has an active infestation. All infested persons (household members and close contacts) and their bedmates should be treated at the same time. Whenever using any type of treatment read the directions carefully.

Over-the-counter Medications

Many head lice medications are available without a prescription at a local pharmacy. Each Over-the-counter product approved by the FDA for the treatment of head lice contains one of the following active

ingredients. If crawling lice are still seen after a full course of treatment contact your health care provider.

1. *Pyrethrins*

combined with piperonyl butoxide;

Brand name products: A-200*, Pronto*, R&C*, Rid*, Triple X*.

Pyrethrins are safe and effective when used as directed. Pyrethrins can only kill live lice, not unhatched eggs (nits). A second treatment is recommended 9 to 10 days after the first treatment to kill any newly hatched lice before they can produce new eggs. Pyrethrins generally should not be used by persons who are allergic to chrysanthemums or ragweed. Pyrethrin is approved for use on children 2 years of age and older.

2. *Permethrin lotion, 1%;*

Brand name product: Nix*.

Permethrin lotion 1% is approved by the FDA for the treatment of head lice.

Permethrin is safe and effective when used as directed. Permethrin kills live lice but not unhatched eggs. Permethrin may continue to kill newly hatched lice for several days after treatment. A second treatment often is necessary on day 9 to kill any newly hatched lice before they can produce new eggs. Permethrin is approved for use on children 2 months of age and older.

Prescription medication

Please consult your physician regarding prescription medication for the treatment of head lice.

Cleaning Personal Items

- Machine wash and dry clothing, bed linens, and other items that the infested person wore or used during the 2 days before treatment using the hot water (130°F) laundry cycle and the high heat drying cycle. Clothing and items that are not washable can be dry-cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag and stored for 2 weeks.
- Soak combs and brushes in hot water (at least 130°F) for 5–10 minutes.
- Vacuum the floor and furniture, particularly where the infested person sat or lay. However, the risk of getting infested by a louse that has fallen onto a rug or carpet or furniture is very small. Head lice survive less than 1–2 days if they fall off a person and cannot feed; nits cannot hatch and usually die within a week if they are not kept at the same temperature as that found close to the human scalp. Spending much time and money on housecleaning activities is not necessary to avoid reinfestation by lice or nits that may have fallen off the head or crawled onto furniture or clothing.
- Do not use fumigant sprays; they can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.

Is infestation with head lice reportable to health departments?

Most health departments do not require reporting of head lice infestation. However, it may be beneficial for the sake of others to share information with school nurses, parents of classmates, and others about contact with head lice.