

Facts about Head Lice: Please Read, Learn and Take Action

Information adapted from Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH), American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), Centers for Disease Control and National Pediculosis Association (NPA)

Where do head lice come from?

Head lice do not come “out of the air” or from the ground. They are human parasites and have probably been here since the beginning of time. Desiccated (dried up) head lice and their eggs have been found on the hair and scalps of Egyptian mummies. Lots of folks have misconceptions about head lice and the people who have them. Head lice can affect anyone: rich or poor, young or old, male or female. An outbreak of head lice in your family does not mean that you’re a bad housekeeper or that you don’t bathe. It does mean loss of school for kids, loss of work time for parents and often the unnecessary use and misuse of potentially harmful pesticide treatments.

Do head lice cause harm?

Head lice rarely (if ever) cause direct harm, and they are not known to transmit infectious agents. Thus, they should not be considered as a medical or public health problem. These lice may occasionally be burdensome because of annoyance; their presence may cause itching and loss of sleep. The greatest harm associated with head lice results from the well-intentioned but misguided use of caustic or toxic substances to eliminate the lice.

What can we do to prevent head lice?

The sooner nits (louse eggs) and head lice are detected, the easier and quicker it is to control and remove them because they multiply quickly. This is the reason why the (NPA) recommends that parents screen their children regularly (several times a week) as part of routine hygiene.

What is the life cycle of the head louse?

Head lice can survive on a human host for approximately 30 days. Head lice generally cannot survive longer than 24 hours off the host. A female louse lays up to 3-5 eggs per day. It takes 7-10 days for the eggs to hatch and another 7-10 days for the louse to mature and lay their own eggs.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice can be spread whenever there is direct contact of the head or hair with an infested individual. Lice can also be spread through the sharing of personal articles like hats, towels, brushes, helmets, hair ties and so on. There is also a possibility that head lice can be spread via a pillow, head rest or similar items. Head lice do not jump or fly and generally cannot survive longer than 24 hours off the host.

Can you catch head lice from car seats, pillow or furniture?

Head lice do not leave a head in search of new hosts. If a louse comes off the head and is left behind (i.e. on a pillow or a head rest) it may be possible for the louse to infest another individual who places their head in that area. Vacuuming is recommended for any areas or items that may be in regular contact with those who may be infested.

Do head lice jump?

Head lice do not have hind legs to hop or jump, nor wings with which to fly.

What do head lice look like?

Head lice are small, brown insects no larger than the size of sesame seeds. The female head louse lays eggs, called nits, on the hair close to the scalp. The nits look like tiny, whitish ovals that are firmly glued to the hairshafts.

Can you catch head lice in a pool, pond or lake?

Swimming with someone who has lice carries no greater risk of transmission than any other activity, nor will the water affect the infestation. When lice are in water, they go into a state of suspended animation but remain firmly locked onto the hair – literally hanging on for dear life. Lice or nits that might detach in a swimming pool would likely be removed by the pool filter or otherwise perish before contacting another person. Closing a swimming pool because of lice is not indicated. Risks of transmission will occur, however, with the sharing and piling of towels, storing other personal items and clothing in close proximity and especially direct head to head contact.

Can you catch head lice from pets or from sharing headphones or helmets?

Head lice cannot thrive on pets; they are human parasites. The extent to which head lice are transmitted to others via headphones and helmets is unknown, but considered rare. Still, risks of transmission are minimized when children have and use their own equipment. When sharing is necessary, the items can be cleaned between kids by wiping them with a damp paper towel. Children can also wear a baseball cap to help shield the hair from contact with the items. Helmets and headphones should never be sprayed! Most importantly – and best for the entire community - all parents should regularly screen their children for head lice and nits (at least twice weekly).

How do you treat a home for lice?

Homes don't get head lice – people do. Head lice are human parasites and require human blood to survive. Please do not use any pesticidal sprays in your home. They are unwarranted and may pose personal and environmental hazards. Vacuuming is the safest and best way to remove lice or fallen hairs with attached nits from the upholstered furniture, rugs, stuffed animals and cars. It is unnecessary to bag objects that can't be washed and dried (see below). Vacuum them instead. Save your time and energy for actions that benefit you the most – especially through nit removal.

If my child gets head lice, what product should be used for treatment?

Treatment should be considered only when active lice or viable eggs are observed. There are no safe pesticides, “natural” or otherwise, that are scientifically proven to be 100% effective against head lice, nits or nit glue. Unnecessary and repeated use of potentially harmful chemicals contributes to ongoing infestations, outbreaks and resistant strains of lice. Parents are discouraged from spending unnecessary time and money on “concoctions” for which there is no scientific basis for claims or evidence of efficacy and human safety. A wide variety of “lice remedies” is vigorously marketed to consumers especially via the Internet; some may have harmful effects and unfounded treatment recommendations. Mechanical (manual) removal is a necessary component of any head lice treatment regimen and can be a safe alternative to pesticides, but is also extremely time consuming. The NPA recommends a combing tool (the LiceMeister) to enable families to screen often, detect head lice early and thoroughly remove lice and nits. Removal of live lice and nits by combing is assisted when the hair is first moistened with a hair conditioner. Current medical recommendations include: 1) complete nit/lice removal, or one course of an over-the-counter product (giving 2 doses if directed); 2) if still infested, one course of a prescription product (e.g., Ovide); and 3) if still infested, use only mechanical removal, as further use of pesticides is not recommended and may be harmful.