

HEAD LICE (Pediculosis) TIPS

Head lice are not a health hazard or sign of uncleanliness and are not responsible for the spread of any disease. The most common symptom is itching. Individuals with head lice infestation may scratch the scalp to alleviate itching, especially behind the ears and at the nape of the neck, and there rarely may be a secondary bacterial infection.

Appearance

1. An adult louse is 2-3mm long (size of a sesame seed)
2. Pale gray to brown in color (may vary)
3. Females live up to 3 – 4 weeks and lay approximately 10 eggs (nits) per day
4. Nits are tiny, whitish and firmly attached to the hair shaft close to the scalp with a glue-like substance produced by the louse
5. In general, nits found more than 1 cm from the scalp are unlikely to be viable
6. Viable nits may be camouflaged with pigment to match the hair color of the infested person; they appear to have an "eye spot"
7. Empty nit casings are easier to see as they appear opaque white against darker hair

Viability

1. Nits take 10 – 14 days to hatch and grow for approximately 9 – 12 days
2. The mature louse mates and the females lay eggs and if NOT treated the process may repeat every three weeks
3. Viability is on the human head only with feeding by injecting small amounts of saliva and taking tiny amounts of blood from the scalp every few hours
4. Lice survive for up to 24 hours off the human scalp at normal temperature and eggs cannot hatch at an ambient temperature lower than that near the scalp

Transmission

1. Lice crawl; they do not hop or fly
2. Lice spread in most cases by direct contact with the head of another infested individual
3. Indirect spreading through contact with personal belongings of an infested individual (combs, brushes, hats) is much less likely but cannot be excluded
4. Lice found on combs are likely to be injured or dead, and a healthy louse is not likely to leave a healthy head
5. Most common in children ages 3 - 12

Prevention

1. It is probably impossible to totally prevent head lice infestations. Young children frequently come into close head-to-head contact with each other.
2. It is prudent for children to be taught not to share personal items such as combs, brushes, and hats.
3. Affected children should be treated promptly to minimize the spread to others.

Treatment

1. Consult your health care provider for appropriate treatment and follow directions.
2. Use of a fine-tined metal comb may be helpful in removing nits for aesthetic reasons.
3. All household members of the infected individual should be checked at home and only those found with live lice or nits within 1 cm of the scalp should be treated.
4. It is prudent to clean hair care items and bedding of the infested individual.
5. Other items, furniture, clothing or carpeting that have been in contact with the head of the individual with infestation in the 24 to 48 hours before treatment should be considered for cleaning/vacuuming. (Louse survival off the scalp beyond 48 hours is extremely unlikely.)
6. Washing, soaking, or drying items at temperatures greater than 130° F will kill any stray lice or nits.