

# Fact Sheet: Head Lice

## What are Head Lice?

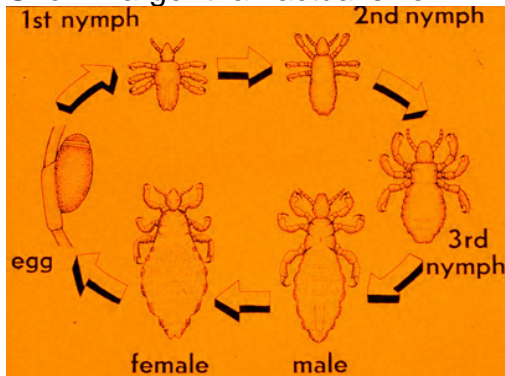
Head lice are very small blood sucking insects that feed on blood from the scalp. Head lice do not pose a significant health hazard and are not known to spread disease.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

- Live and dead lice in the hair
- Nits on hair shafts
- Itchy scalp
- A rash around the neck or ears

Head lice and nits are most commonly found on the scalp, behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the head. Check the hair and scalp of all family members for lice and nits. It is difficult to see live lice on a head; typically, only nits are seen. Head lice are rarely found on the body, eyelashes, or eyebrows.

Shown larger than actual size.



**The life cycle of the head louse has three stages: egg, nymph, and adult.**

**Eggs:** Nits are head lice eggs. They are hard to see and are often confused for dandruff or hair spray droplets. Nits are laid by the adult female and are cemented at the base of the hair shaft close to the scalp. They are about the size of a knot of thread, oval in shape and usually yellow to white. Nits take about 1 week to hatch. Live eggs are usually located within ¼ inch of the scalp.

**Nymphs:** The egg hatches to release a nymph. The nit shell then becomes a more visible dull yellow and remains attached to the hair shaft. The nymph looks like an adult head louse, but is about the size of a pinhead. Nymphs become adults about 7 days after hatching.

**Adults:** The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has 6 legs (each with claws), and is tan to grayish-white. In persons with dark hair, the adult louse will appear darker. Females are usually larger than males and can lay up to 8 nits per day. Adult lice need to feed on blood several times daily, and can live up to 30 days on a person's head. If the louse falls off a person it dies within 2 days.

## How is it spread?

- Head lice are spread through:
- Direct contact with an already infested person. Head to head contact is common among children during play at home and school.
- Wearing clothes and hats or using combs and brushes which have been used recently by an infested person.
- Lying on carpets, bedding, couches, pillows, or stuffed animals which have recently been in contact with an infested person.

## How is it treated?

**Lice may be treated on your own without having to go to the doctor.** Head lice treatment shampoos and cream rinses can be purchased at any pharmacy. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for treatment recommendations. **Be sure to read all directions carefully and follow them precisely.** Do not apply the lice treatment to children under two years old or to a pregnant or nursing mother unless advised by a doctor.

In general, before using the lice shampoo, wash the hair with a shampoo (without conditioners) to remove any natural oils. After using the lice shampoo, when the hair is still wet, use a nit comb to comb out the nits. Do not rewash hair for 1-2 days after treatment. A metal comb removes nits better than plastic combs. Some people find it even easier to “strip” the nits from the hair shaft by pinching small strands of hair between the thumbnail and forefinger and pulling the hair through.

### **You need to remove all the nits on the head.**

A second treatment is recommended 7-10 days after the first treatment. One week after the second treatment do a final check to see if there are any new nits close to the scalp. Treat again if you see any live lice or new nits. Nits that are found ½ inch or more from the scalp are dead but need to be removed to complete the treatment.

## Ridding lice from the home

- Wash all clothing and bedding used in the 2 days prior to treatment in hot water for at least 10 minutes, and dry on high heat in a dryer for at least 30 minutes.
- Clothing and other articles that cannot be washed should be either; dry-cleaned, put in the dryer on high for thirty minutes, or put in a tightly sealed bag for 14 days at room temperature or for 24 hours at below freezing temperatures.
- Combs, brushes, curlers and hair ornaments should be soaked for one hour in your hottest tap water with lice shampoo.
- Pillows, upholstered furniture, mattresses, carpets, rugs, and cloth car seats should be vacuumed thoroughly.
- Lice sprays are not recommended. They are very toxic and not necessary.

## How is it prevented?

You can prevent head lice by avoiding contact with objects that may be infested. Do not use the hats, combs, brushes, or hair ornaments of other people.

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.*



Visit our website at: <http://publichealth.eWashtenaw.org>  
Or the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention at: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)  
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