

## **Head Lice:** Everything you always wanted to know about head lice

Head lice are wingless insects that live on the human scalp - especially the scalps of young children. They do not carry disease, but they can be unsightly, itchy, and upsetting. Getting lice can happen to any child, and is not a reason for panic or embarrassment. When teachers or school nurses find signs of lice or lice eggs, they usually send a child home with instructions not to return until signs of the infestation are gone. If this should happen to your child, you will naturally be concerned. This guide will help you sort fact from fiction and make an effective response.

### **The lore of lice**

Few childhood ailments have accumulated as much lore as lice infestation, some of it true and much of it fantasy. Here are the facts:

- Lice infestation is not rare. Six to 12 million persons in the United States get lice every year, and most of them are school children.
- Children do *not* get head lice because they are dirty, neglected, or poor, and meticulous hygiene will *not* prevent an infestation. They probably don't pick up lice by sharing combs or hats. They *do* get lice from direct, head-to-head contact with other children who have lice, usually their close friends.
- Lice *don't* prefer children with long hair, although they do seem to prefer girls - probably because girls are more likely than boys to play close to their best friends.
- Lice *are* more common in white than in black children. This is probably because it is easier for lice to cling to the round hair shafts of white children than to the oval hair shafts typical in black children.
- Lice have no wings, so they can't fly from one head to another, and they don't hop. They can scurry, however.
- Infested children are not likely to have great swarms of lice in their hair; many have only one or two.

### **Signs and symptoms**

Quite possibly, none. Children with lice may have itchy scalps, but about half of them do not. Sometimes, when children scratch louse bites vigorously, the sites get infected. If you see redness or swelling on your child's scalp, or notice swollen lymph glands in the neck, bring your child to the office so that we can prescribe treatment for the infection.

### **Checking for lice**

To look for lice, especially if you've heard of lice infestations among your child's friends or at school, use a fine-toothed comb under a strong light. Lice are not easy to find; when you shine a light or start combing the child's hair, they hide. Adult females are about as big as a sesame seed and either black or reddish-brown. Eggs and nits are also hard to find. Eggs are small, translucent, and firmly glued to the hair shaft very close to the scalp, often behind the ears or at the back of the neck. Nits, which are the empty shells of hatched eggs, are a little easier to see because they reflect light and are found farther out on the hair shaft. Eggs or nits are not always a sign of active infestation. But some schools will not allow children to attend until the nits are gone, and nits may indicate that lice are - or have recently been - living on your child's scalp. For instructions on how to get rid of nits and lice, see the next section.

### **What to do**

If you - or the school nurse - find lice or nits on your child's head, you can treat the child at home with shampoos or rinses that you can buy at the pharmacy without a prescription. Call our office if you would like us to

verify the diagnosis or recommend a particular remedy, such as Nix creme rise, RID shampoo, A-200, Pronto, or R&C shampoo. These products will kill virtually all the adult lice on your child's scalp and most of the eggs. You may have heard stories about smothering lice with a heavy layer of petroleum jelly, mayonnaise, or olive oil and covering the scalp with a shower cap for several hours or overnight; these methods have not been studied and probably do not kill the eggs.

When you use lice shampoos or creme rinses, follow these guidelines:

- Apply pyrethrin-PB shampoos (RID and others) to dry hair. Saturate the hair completely and massage into the scalp. Wait ten minutes, than add water to form lather, shampoo, and rise thoroughly. Hair may be difficult to comb after treatment. You can use a regular shampoo and conditioner after the treatment to help get the tangles out; using these products will not reduce the effectiveness of the pediculicide.

- If you use a permethrin creme rinse (Nix), start by giving the child a regular shampoo, rinse the hair and towel dry. Then apply enough creme rinse to saturate the hair and scalp. Leave it on for 10 minutes, and rinse with water.

- After treatment, comb hair thoroughly to remove lice eggs. This takes time, especially with long thick hair, but it's a crucial step. If any eggs are left behind, they may hatch and begin a new infestation.

- Repeat the treatment in seven to 12 days to make sure all the eggs have been killed.

- Inspect the scalp 24 to 48 hours after the treatment to see if any lice remain. If you find any, call our office; we may suggest using a different pediculicide.

There are reports from other countries of lice developing resistance to certain pediculicides, and that may be the problem.

- Do not use pediculicides as a preventive measure to protect other family members. There is no evidence that they work this way, and overuse may create resistance.

- Sterilizing the infected child's clothes or possessions is probably not necessary; lice don't live long away from the scalp. However, it may be beneficial. Put washable clothing and bedding through a high-heat dryer cycle first, then the washing machine. You can dry-clean anything that isn't washable, or seal items in plastic bags for two weeks.

- If your child complains of itching even after the lice are gone, call us. The itching is most likely an allergic response to the dead lice and eggs and not a new infestation. We may be able to prescribe medication that will help.