

# Head Lice

This is a magnified picture of head lice on a fine-tooth comb which shows that these bugs are very tiny.



## Head Lice Signs and Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of head lice include:

- Itchy scalp
- Scratching
- Some people scratch so much that the scalp
  - sometimes the back of the neck becomes red and irritated
- Crawling sensation
  - People often feel something crawling on the hair or scalp
- Seeing bugs
  - These look like light-brown sesame seeds crawling on the:
    - hair
    - skin
    - clothing
- Finding lice eggs (nits)
  - - the eggs are yellow,
  - brown, or tan
  - the size of a pinhead
  - seem glued to the hair
  - if the eggs have hatched, you will see clear shells.
- Swollen lymph nodes (many people call “glands”) in the neck.
- Pink eye- this is a common eye infection.

## Facts about Head Lice

Facts about Head Lice:

- Having head lice does not mean you are dirty
- Lice do not care whether hair is squeaky-clean or dirty
- Lice feed off of human blood to survive
- Millions of people get head lice each year
- Head-lice infestations are especially common in schools
- Head lice do not spread disease
- Head lice can make your scalp extremely itchy
- Treatment usually gets rid of head lice
- Head lice actually crawl everywhere.
- People get head lice when they have head-to-head contact with someone who has head lice
  - Head-to-head contact lets the lice crawl from one head to another head
  - They crawl on to objects that come into contact with human hair such as hats and towels
  - Head lice crawl onto objects that have touched the human head
- You can get head lice by sharing objects infested with lice such as:
  - hats
  - scarves
  - coats
  - hair accessories
  - brushes
  - combs
  - towels
- You can also get head lice by resting your head on a:
  - bed
  - pillow
  - couch
  - chair
  - rug that someone with head lice used
- They cannot fly or jump, but they are tiny and move quickly

## Checking for Head Lice at Home

Follow these steps:

- Find a bright light or flash light
- Find a fine-tooth comb or lice comb
- Wet the hair of the child
  - This also prevents the lice from scurrying away.
- Sit the affected child or adult under a bright light.
- Separate hair into sections
  - Beginning at the scalp,
  - slowly comb outward through the hair section by section.

As you comb through the hair, look closely at the hair behind the ears and around the nape of the neck.

What to look for:

- Head-lice eggs:
  - Before the eggs hatch, you will see color as shown here on the left.
  - After the eggs hatch, you see a clear shell as seen on the right.
  - look for adult lice and their eggs (called nits)
  - You're more likely to see nits than adults because nits are firmly attached to the hair and do not move.



If the person has adult lice or nits, you will see the following:

- Adult lice:
  - light-brown objects that resemble sesame seeds, often moving quickly.
  - You can find these on the scalp or the hair.
- Eggs:
  - yellow, brown, or tan objects that look like tiny seeds
  - cemented to individual hairs close to the scalp.
  - If an egg has hatched, the seed-like object will be clear.

When looking closely at the scalp and hair, it is important to know:

- that kids and adults can have all kinds of stuff in their hair.
- You may see sand, dirt, lint, or dandruff.
- All of these comb out easily.
- Nits seem cemented to the hair and very difficult to remove.

## **Treating head lice at home**

There are several products that you can buy at your local drug or grocery store to get rid of head lice and their nits. These are available without a prescription.

Doctors and Dermatologists offer the following tips for using these products:

- First treatment
- Carefully read and follow the directions.
- Using a lice shampoo usually involves:
  - lathering a regular shampoo into the hair
  - leaving the shampoo on for a few minutes
  - rinse
- Apply the lice removal product to the head:
  - of a fully dressed person
  - rinse the product out with a spray hose or running water from a sink.
- These products are not meant for use while taking a shower or bath.
  - You want to limit the amount of skin that the product touches.
- Use only one product.
  - Using two products meant to treat head lice can be harmful.
  - If two different products are necessary, your dermatologist can tell you which ones can be combined.
- Use the amount stated on the product.
  - Using more can be harmful.
- Use the lice comb that comes with the shampoo.
  - The teeth on a lice comb are closer together than the teeth on a regular comb.
  - Placing the teeth closer together makes it easier to remove the lice and their nits.
- Look at the hair 8 to 12 hours after treatment.
  - If the lice seem as active as they were before the treatment, the medicine may not be working.
- Do not treat again.
  - Talk with your doctor or dermatologist.
  - A different lice medicine may be necessary.

The next day, if the medicine seems to be working, you'll want to:

- Wait 2 days to wash your hair.
  - This lets the medicated product continue to work.
- Continue to comb through the hair with the lice comb once a day.
  - Doing this for 2 to 3 weeks helps to ensure that you get rid of the lice.

7 to 9 days after the first treatment:

- Retreat as recommended on the package.
  - Retreatment is generally recommended with all products you can buy without a prescription.
  - Retreatment is usually done 7 to 9 days after the first treatment.
  - The lice shampoos often are more successful at killing the adult lice than the nits, so retreatment helps to kill any surviving lice that hatched after the first treatment.
  - No approved treatment for head lice can kill all the eggs during the first treatment.
- After applying the second treatment,
  - comb through the hair with the lice comb.
  - Wait 2 days to wash the hair.
  - Continue to comb through the hair with the lice comb once a day.
  - Do this for 2 weeks, checking for lice and nits.

How to improve at-home treatment for head lice:

- Use a lice comb:
  - Using a lice comb can improve the effectiveness of treatment.
  - It is important to use a lice comb when school policy requires that a child be “nit free” before returning to school.
- Another treatment option is to shave the scalp bald.
- Treat family and friends:
  - It is very common for close family and friends to get head lice.
- Dermatologists recommend that you check everyone for head lice.
  - You do not want to treat anyone who does not have head lice; however,
  - you should check everyone every day for 10 to 15 days.

## When to see a dermatologist about head lice

If the at-home treatment does not work or this seems more than you can handle, you should see a dermatologist for treatment.

Your dermatologist may recommend a product that you can buy without a prescription or a prescription medicine.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved the following prescription medicines to treat head lice:

- Benzyl alcohol lotion:
  - Approved to treat head lice in people 6 months of age and older,
    - this medicine is applied to dry hair.
    - When using this treatment, you want to saturate the scalp and hair.
    - After 10 minutes, it's time to thoroughly rinse off the medicine.
  - benzyl alcohol kills the lice but not their eggs
  - repeat the treatment in 7 days.
  - comb the hair for nits.
- Ivermectin (eye-ver-mec-tin) lotion:
  - Approved to treat head lice in people 6 months of age and older
  - Ivermectin treats most head lice with just one use
  - without the need to comb nits out of the hair.
    - Side effects include itchy skin,
    - eye irritation (if the medicine gets in an eye),
    - a burning sensation on the skin.
    - All are temporary.
- Malathion (mal-uh-THIGH-on) lotion:
  - Approved to treat people ages 6 years of age and older,
  - malathion works by paralyzing and killing the lice and their eggs.
  - This is very potent medicine, so be sure that you:
    - Keep the medicine away from everyone's eyes.
    - If the medicine gets in someone's eyes, flush the eyes right away with lots of water for several minutes.
  - Most people need to apply this medicine only once.
  - Nit combing is not necessary.
  - You will need to check the scalp 7 days after treatment.
  - If crawling lice are seen be sure to tell your dermatologist.
  - You may need to repeat the treatment
  - Do NOT smoke while using this medicine.
    - If anyone in the room smokes while this medicine is being

- used, a fire can start.
- Leave cigarettes, cigars, and other things that you can smoke in another room.
  - Keep the medicine away from flames.
  - You want to use malathion in a room without a stove or fireplace.
  - Because malathion can cause a fire, even unlit lighters and camp stoves should **NOT** be in the room where you'll use malathion.
  - If you're using malathion outdoors, be sure a camp fire is **NOT** burning.
  - Keep all electrical appliances that produce heat turned off.
  - Using this medicine while a blow dryer, iron, curling iron, or space heater is running nearby can start a fire.
- When used as directed, malathion is safe and effective.
  - It can irritate the skin a bit as it works.
  - May cause dry hair or their skin can burn or sting.
  - Side effects are temporary.
- Spinosad suspension:
    - This medicine is approved to treat head lice in people 6 months of age and older.
    - It has been found to be safe and effective when used as directed.
    - Most people need to apply this medicine only once.
    - Nit combing is not necessary.
    - check the scalp 7 days after treatment.
    - If crawling lice are seen be sure to tell your dermatologist. You may need to repeat the treatment.
  - Lindane shampoo:
    - This medicine has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to treat head lice.
    - Approved to treat head lice, this treatment is prescribed when other treatments do not work.
    - It is essential to use lindane shampoo only as directed.
    - It can be toxic when misused.

## Treating your home for head lice



### You Must Also Treat Your Home for Head Lice

Whether you treat at home or see a dermatologist, you must also treat your home. To avoid another infestation, you should clean the following items:

- Brushes and combs
  - Soak combs and brushes that a person with head lice used.
  - Soak these in hot water, 130 degrees Fahrenheit or hotter, for 10 minutes.
- Sheets, pillowcases, clothes, blankets, and towels
  - Place all items that touched the person's head during the past 2 days in a washing machine and wash in hot water.
  - Dry all machine-washed items in a hot dryer, using the hottest setting.
  - Dry for at least 10 minutes.
- Stuffed animals and pillows
  - Place items that cannot be machine washed in a hot dryer and run the dryer on the hottest setting for 20 to 30 minutes.
- Other personal items
  - Hair accessories, helmets, headphones, and other personal items can become infested with head lice. If a person with head lice has touched any of these items during the past 2 days, you can kill the lice on these objects by:
    - Sealing the objects in plastic bags.
    - Placing the plastic bags in the freezer overnight or keeping the bags sealed for 2 weeks.

- Two weeks is the amount of time needed for adult lice and newly hatched lice to die when hot water, dryer heat, and freezing are impractical.
- Furniture, carpets, and floors
  - Vacuum these thoroughly to pick up any hairs the person with head lice has shed.
  - Everyone normally loses about 50 to 100 hairs a day.

## **Outcome**

Two treatments (spaced 7 to 9 days apart) often get rid of head lice.

- If your child or someone else in your family still has head lice after a few weeks, it means that the treatments did not work or the person got lice again.
- Make an appointment to see a dermatologist for help getting rid of the head lice. With proper treatment, it is possible to get rid of head lice.