



## Head Lice

### What are head lice?

The head louse, or *Pediculus Humanus capitis*, is a parasitic insect that can be found on the head, eyebrows and eyelashes of people. Head lice feed on human blood several times a day and live close to the human scalp. Head lice are not known to spread disease.

### Who is at risk for getting head lice?

In the United States, head lice is most common among children attending child care, preschool or elementary school and among those who live in the households with these children. Head lice are spread by direct contact with the hair of an infested person. It is not common for head lice to be spread by contact with clothing, towels, brushes or combs of an infested person. Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with getting head lice.

It is estimated that there are 6-12 million cases of head lice per year in the US amongst children 3 to 11 years of age. African Americans are much less susceptible to head lice than other races.



### Where are head lice most commonly found?

Head lice are found almost exclusively on the scalp, especially around the ears and neckline. Head lice are sometimes found on the eyelashes or eyebrows but this is uncommon. They hold tightly to hair with hook-like claws at the end of each of their six legs. Head lice eggs are cemented firmly to the hair shaft and can be difficult to remove.

### What are the symptoms of head lice infestation?

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of the head louse
- Irritability and difficulty sleeping; head lice are most active in the dark
- Sores on the head caused by scratching

### How does someone get head lice?

Head-to-head contact with an already infested person is the most common way to get head lice. Head-to-head contact is common during play at school and home, or during sports activities, slumber parties or camp.

Although uncommon, head lice can be spread by sharing clothing or belongings of an infested person. Examples include hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, hair ribbons, barrettes, combs, brushes, towels and stuffed animals. Contact with pillows, furniture, beds and carpet can also spread head lice.



## How is head lice diagnosed?

Diagnosis of head lice is best made by finding a live louse on the scalp or hair. However, lice are very small, move quickly and avoid light making them hard to find. If crawling lice are not seen, finding eggs within 1/4 inch of the base of the hair is an indication that the person should be treated for head lice. If eggs are found more than 1/4 inch from the base of the hair, they are almost always dead or already hatched. If no live lice are found and the only eggs are more than 1/4 inch from the scalp, the infestation is likely no longer active and does not need treatment.

## How is head lice treated?

Head lice is treated with medicines or pediculides applied to the hair and scalp. Prescription and over-the-counter treatments are available. It is important to follow the directions on the specific medicine you use. Do not use multiple types of head lice treatments unless instructed to do so by your doctor or pharmacist.

Excessive or expensive housecleaning is not needed to kill head lice in the home. Head lice do not survive long if they fall off of the infected person. These supplemental measures should prevent re-infestations:

- Machine wash and dry clothing and bed linens using hot water and the high heat cycle.
- Head lice and eggs are killed by exposure for 5 minutes to temperatures of 129° F or higher.
- Clothing or items that cannot be washed or dry-cleaned should be sealed in a plastic bag for two weeks to kill any remaining lice or eggs.
- Soak combs and brushes in hot water (at least 129°) for 5-10 minutes.
- Vacuum the floor and furniture.

## Do head lice spread disease?

No, head lice do not spread disease. Head lice should not be considered a medical or public health hazard. Their presence however can be a nuisance since it may cause itching, scratching or loss of sleep.

## For more information:

Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website at [www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice](http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice) or call Huron County Public Health at 419-668-1652.