

HEAD LICE FACT SHEET

(Pediculosis Capitis)

What are head lice?

Head lice are parasites – very small bugs. They live on the head in the hair. You may also find them in eyebrows, eyelashes, and beard.

Head lice are most commonly found in young, school age children, but anyone can get head lice. It does not matter whether a person is young or old, dirty or clean, rich or poor.

Adult head lice are hard to see. They are gray or brown in color and about 1/8 inch long. Their eggs, called nits, are easier to find. Nits are tan or off-white in color. The nits may at first look like dandruff, but you will find that the nits are very firmly stuck to the strands of hair. Nits will not flake off or wash off like dandruff.

Head lice live for about one month and they multiply very quickly. Adult female lice lay up to 6 nits a day. These nits will hatch in 7 to 10 days. About 8 to 14 days later they will be mature and lay more eggs. Head lice can live away from the human head for only two days.

How do you get head lice?

You can get head lice by:

- direct contact with a person with head lice—head touching head
- sharing items with a person who has head lice—things like combs, brushes, hats, headbands, scarves, barrettes, hair ribbons. Children should be warned not to share these things
- your head coming in contact with items that a person with head lice has come in contact with such as:
Upholstered furniture, car seats, pillows, towels, coats, sweaters, wigs, rugs, beds, cots, sleeping bags, stuffed toys, “dress up” hats
Head lice can also be spread in shared lockers

Head lice do not jump or fly.

Head lice do not come from or live on animals. Your pets do not need to be treated during a head lice outbreak.

How do you know if you have head lice?

These are some things to look for:

- itching of the head
- scratches, bite marks, or rash on the head or neck. Sometimes these scratches get infected
- nits on the hair strands. It may help you see the nits if you have good lighting and use a magnifying glass. Nits may be found throughout the hair but are more often behind the ears and on the back of head near the neck.
- sometimes swollen glands in the neck and under the arms
- sometimes there may be no symptoms

How do you get rid of head lice? (Treatment)

As soon as you find head lice, you should treat them because they spread so quickly. If one person in a family has head lice, there is a good chance that others will have it, too. Everyone should be checked, and only those who have head lice should be treated at the same time.

- Using a lice treatment on the hair recommended by your pharmacist or doctor
- Removing all nits
- Cleaning things the person with head lice has used or worn

There are a number of approved lice treatments that can be used to get rid of head lice. Some of these treatments you can get over the counter (just tell the pharmacist what you need), and some must be ordered by a doctor. You must use one of these special head lice treatments. Washing with regular shampoo will not get rid of head lice.

Before using any of these head lice treatments, read all the directions and follow them exactly.

Removing all Nits

This will take time but you must do it if you want to get rid of the head lice. Just using a lice treatment is not enough, as it will not kill or remove all the nits. You can do nit removal with a special nit comb—the metal combs are best—or with your fingers. Nit combing is easier if the hair is dry or slightly damp. Work in a well-lit area and work through a small section of hair at a time so you don't miss any nits.

After the treatment and nit removal, check the person's head every day for at least 10 days. Some lice treatments will need to be used again in 10 days. If after the second treatment there are still signs of head lice or nits, call your doctor. **Do not treat again without your doctor's advice.**

Cleaning

Clean everything that has been in contact with the head and neck of the person with head lice. These things may have lice or nits on them. If you don't clean them well, you will get head lice again. Items to clean include:

- combs, brushes, barrettes. Soak them in **hot** water with a strong disinfectant for one hour
- washable things like clothes, jackets, sweaters, scarves, hats, headbands, sheets, pillows, pillowcases, towels and wash cloths. Wash in **hot** water and dry in a **hot** dryer
- non-washable clothes and other non-washable items like stuffed toys and pillows should be stored in a tightly sealed plastic bag for 14 days
- upholstered furniture, car seats, pillows, mattresses, box springs, rugs, floors and stuffed animals. Vacuum well. With furniture, vacuum cushions then take them off the chair and vacuum in all the corners and folds. Bed and cot surfaces must be vacuumed. After use, the vacuum cleaner bag must be thrown away in a sealed plastic bag.

This will insure that the nits will no longer be able to hatch. There is no need to have your home or school fumigated for head lice. **In fact spraying or fumigating has been found in some cases to be harmful to small children and pets.**

Head lice do not infest an area like fleas do. Careful cleaning and vacuuming of the area is all that is needed.

Head lice and school or child care

If you find head lice or nits on your child, tell the school nurse or childcare director right away. Don't be embarrassed. Remember that head lice can happen to anyone. The important thing is to tell the right people so steps can be taken to stop the spread of head lice. Other children in the school or day care may also have head lice. Everyone who has head lice will have to be treated or the children will reinfest each other.

Tell the parents of your child's playmates because they should also be checked for head lice.

The child with head lice and nits is kept out of school and bus transportation until properly treated for head lice. This is done because head lice can spread so quickly. When your child has been treated and you are ready to bring the child back to school, call your school nurse. The school nurse will check your child's head before allowing the child back in the classroom.

Harford County Public Schools has a "no-nit" policy – meaning your child cannot come back to school until **all** nits are gone from the hair.

Have questions?

Call the Harford County Health Department at 410-612-1779 or Harford County Public Schools at 410-588-5291, Monday through Friday, between 8:00 am and 4:00 pm.