

# DOES MY CHILD HAVE HEAD LICE?

## What are head lice?

Head lice are small insects that cause itching while feeding on the scalp of infested people.

## How do they live?

Head lice have a 30-35 day life span. The female louse lays her eggs and cements them to human head hair. The head louse prefers to lay its eggs on the hair at the back of the neck and behind the ears. The eggs (nits) are "incubated" by human body heat.

## What are the symptoms of head lice infestation?

Itching is the most common symptom and is caused by a reaction to insect saliva injected during the bite. Bacterial infections can occur from scratching areas where biting has occurred.

## How do people know if they have head lice?

The adult lice lay their eggs at the base of the hairshaft (at the scalp). The eggs are called nits and can be seen with the naked eye or with a magnifying glass. Before the egg hatches it appears full and white. If you see a white speck on the hair and it is difficult to remove, it may be lice eggs stuck to the hair. You will probably notice more than one egg on the hair.

## How are head lice spread?

Lice may spread from person to person by direct personal contact or from sharing blankets, combs, towels and clothing (e.g. hats). School children especially may become infested with lice because of their close contact in classrooms and at play. However, older people may also contract lice.

*Editor's Note: With summer time here, children are away at camp. A number of children will come home with unwanted head lice. There is usually a wide spread of head lice at schools in September and October as a result of this.*

## How are cases of head lice treated?

There are many effective shampoos and cream rinse products available for the treatment of head lice. Some are sold over the counter and others require a prescription.

It is essential that you follow the instructions on the bottle. In order for the medication to work properly, the material must be applied strictly according to the label directions. Less than the recommended time may not be effective and longer exposure may be toxic. Since some of the shampoos may not kill the eggs, a second application 7-10 days later is recommended. In addition, all family members should be checked and treated at the same time if they are infested.

It is important to note that the shampoos or cream rinse products do not remove the eggs since they are attached with a cement-like substance. Fine-tooth combs have been designed specifically for nit removal and are highly effective. The combs work better if the hair is damp.

There are other products available for spraying furniture. It is also important to wash bed linens immediately in hot water.

## How can head lice be prevented and controlled?

- Cases should be treated promptly to prevent spread.
- Treatment should be performed as specified on the container and the nits removed with a specially designed comb.
- If you find that your child has head lice, you should report it to the school nurse so he or she may check other children for lice.
- Screen family members and classmates for infestations. It is best to treat all infested contacts at the same time.
- Clothing (especially hats and coats) and bedding should be washed in hot water and placed in the dryer or dry cleaned.
- Combs and brushes should be washed in treatment shampoo for the specified time or placed in 160 degree F. water for five minutes, or new ones should be purchased.
- Thoroughly vacuum and clean the home. Special attention should be focused on pillows, mattresses, stuffed furniture, removable cushions and carpeting.
- Household insecticide sprays should not be used since they may be harmful, costly and are not effective.
- In classrooms or similar settings, separate lockers or cubbies should be used for each child. If separate lockers or cubbies are not available, hats and coats can be placed in a bag under each chair.
- Keep hair clean. Brush or comb hair regularly. **DO NOT SHARE COMB OR BRUSH WITH OTHERS.**
- **DO NOT** share or use someone else's hat or clothing without thorough washing or cleaning.
- If your child wears fabric ponytail holders or headbands, wash thoroughly or place in a sealed bag for 6 weeks.

*This information was taken from the pamphlet "Head Lice", which is distributed by Westchester County Department of Health. For more information, you can contact this department at (914) 593-5100.*