

# Head Lice

## Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

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### What are head lice?

Head lice (singular 'louse') are tiny insects which infest only the human head and are distinct from body and pubic lice. The head louse is gray in color but tends to take on the hair color of the host. The insect pest is usually found on the lower back of the head or behind the ears, though it can also be found in the eyebrows and on the eyelashes. It is about 2-3 millimeters long and flattened in appearance. It has hook-like claws at the end of each of six legs to help anchor the louse to the hair shaft. Head lice do not jump or fly. A female head louse will live about 30 days on a host, and deposit about 7-10 eggs per day called "nits". The nits are grayish white, oval, and are attached to the base of hair shafts. The nits hatch in about a week, and become adults over the next 9 days. Head lice do not carry or transmit any human disease.

### How do people get head lice?

Head lice can survive away from the human host for up to 3 days, and nits can survive for up to 10 days. The primary source of transmission is direct contact with an infested person, but transmission may also occur through hats, brushes, combs, earphones, bedding and furniture. Human lice do not usually infest pets or other animals.

### What are the signs and symptoms of head lice?

The first major symptom of infestation can be intense itchiness caused by the skin's reaction to the lice feeding. Some individuals may not experience this itchiness. Breaks in the skin caused by the lice and resultant scratching can cause secondary bacterial skin infection, especially in the absence of good hygiene.

### How is head lice diagnosed?

To check for infestation, the scalp must be examined for nits and lice. A provider at Health Services can perform this assessment for you.

### How is head lice treated?

Head lice cannot be treated by ordinary shampoos. There are many over the counter products to treat head lice, including creams, shampoos and lotions. One example is Nix, which kills nits and offers two weeks of residual protection. Most products also come with a comb for nit removal. Never use pesticide treatments near or around your eyes. If brows and lashes are involved, use a fine-toothed comb for removal.

- First, remove all clothing.
- Apply the treatment according to its specific directions.
  - It is important not to use any hair conditioners prior to applying the treatment, as these will limit or negate the effectiveness.
- Rinse the treatment out in a sink rather than the shower to limit further skin exposure.

Clothes, bedding, and other fabric items you have worn or touched during the past 48 hours should be washed in hot water with a detergent then dried in a clothes dryer. Alternate means of disinfecting articles include dry cleaning, isolation in a sealed plastic bag for 14 days, or placing in a freezer. Freezing is lethal to all cycles of the louse and so is a temperature of 125 degrees F for 30 minutes or more.

### **Tips for Nit Removal**

Most treatments also kill nits but do not remove them. It is possible for some nits to be left untreated. Because it is impossible to distinguish between living and dead nits, we recommend removing them with the following steps:

- Use a fine-toothed comb
- Work in a well lit area.
- Dividing the hair into sections, use the comb to go through each section, combing from the scalp outwards to the end of the hair.
- You can dip the comb into a cup of water or use a paper towel to remove any lice, nits, or debris from the comb between passes.

### **Preventing Reinfestation**

To help prevent reinfestation, it is suggested that all family members or roommates be treated on the same day. Most products require a re-treatment 7 to 10 days later to ensure all newly hatched lice are killed. Since head lice cannot live more than two days off the host, and are rarely found off the host, spraying the premises with insecticides is unnecessary. The itch may persist for several days after successful treatment, but if symptoms persist longer, see your medical provider.