

Where **kids** come first

What to do if your child has head lice



L'Hôpital de Montréal pour enfants
The Montreal Children's Hospital

Centre universitaire de santé McGill
McGill University Health Centre

How to know if your child has lice?

If your child has head lice (pediculosis) don't panic or be embarrassed. Anyone can get head lice regardless of age, social status, or economic background. Relax, lice is not a sign of how frequently you wash your child's hair or how clean your home is.

Head lice (*pediculosis humanis capitis*) are small, flat, wingless and elongated parasites with pointed heads. They live only on the human scalp and are barely visible to the human eye. They can match the skin colour of the scalp, making detection very difficult. Head lice usually survive for about three weeks on the scalp.

An adult female lays approximately 100 nits (or eggs) on the hair shaft, closest to the scalp. They attach to the base of the hair. The nits vary in colour: live nits are brownish-yellowish, empty nits (parasite is hatched) are white. They look like teardrops. They are mostly found behind the ears and at the nape of the neck scalp areas, however the entire scalp can be infested.



How to know if your child is infested

School-aged children (five to 12 years) are often victims of head lice. Seeing nits on the hair is a good indication of infestation. The most common symptom is scalp itchiness. But it may take two to three weeks or longer for a person to notice the itching associated with head lice. When lice feed on human blood from the scalp, they inject small amounts of saliva under the skin. The body responds by reacting to the saliva of the lice, resulting in itchiness (pruritus). Pruritus can last for seven to ten days after lice have been successfully removed. Be aware that a simple, perhaps even a nagging itch, is not necessarily an indication of the presence of head lice but if you find nits it is a sign of infestation.

How to remove nits and lice

Nits can easily be removed by picking them out of the hair with a special fine-toothed nit comb. Lice-killing insecticides (pediculocides) are also available and most can be bought over the counter without a prescription. These products do not guarantee 100 percent effectiveness, so their use should be followed by removal of nits with a nit comb to ensure all live nits are removed. With some pediculocides, repeat treatment may be necessary to kill newly hatched lice. A waiting period of seven days between applications is strongly suggested.

Pediculocides should never be used without evidence of lice. Children under two years of age, pregnant women and women who are breastfeeding should check if the treatment with the pediculocides is contraindicated for use. There are some newer treatments which are not chemical insecticides and therefore carry less risk especially for young children. Ask your pharmacist for details.

Tips to help remove nits

- Cover shoulders and the area being worked on to contain falling lice and nits
- Separate hair into four or five sections to ensure that all hair will be combed
- Start from the top so that nits and lice can fall on uncombed areas
- Rinse the nit comb in water to remove all lice and nits prior to each combing
- To dislodge nits that are not coming off, hold the hair at its end then backcomb towards the scalp (from hair tip to scalp)
- Pay special attention to removing the nits within one inch of the scalp as these are more likely to be alive
- Be careful to keep combed areas away from uncombed areas to prevent recontamination
- Carefully pick up and place all sheets, covers, and clothing worn during the combing into the hot water cycle of the washing machine
- Boil the nit comb for ten minutes
- Hair ornaments or utensils that cannot be boiled can be placed in the freezer in a plastic bag for two weeks to kill the nits.



Clean the exposed environment

Head lice can survive for up to two days off the human scalp. Therefore cleaning of all items/articles that have come in contact with the infested head in the last 48 hours may help prevent reinfestation.

Prevention is key

- Inform close contacts of infestation with head lice (family, friends, school teacher and nurse, daycare educator, etc.) so that others can be examined and treated if infested
- Instruct children not to share any headgear, hats, headphones, pillows, etc.
- Advise children to put their hats and scarves into the sleeves of their coats
- Examine children's hair for infestation every time you shampoo or comb their hair
- If infestation with head lice is noted, exclude children from school or daycare until the morning after treatment (24 hours). Do not forget to inform the school/daycare so that others who are also infested are excluded and do not reinfest your child.



This information was prepared by the Pediatric Consultation Centre of The Montreal Children's Hospital of the McGill University Health Center.

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