

Head Lice

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny, greyish brown, wingless insects that live on the scalp, feeding on human blood. They lay eggs which stick to strands of hair very close to the scalp. Once the egg hatches the empty case left behind is called a nit.

Head lice are hard to see because they are tiny and move around on the head. Eggs are very small, about one-third (1/3) the size of a sesame seed and take 6 to 12 days to hatch. The nits are easier to see and are found further down the hair shaft. Both eggs and nits may look like dandruff, but they cannot be easily removed because they are sticky.

Do head lice cause illness or spread disease?

No, head lice do not cause illness or spread disease. However, they can be irritating because of the discomfort they cause and how easily they are spread from person to person.

How are head lice spread?

Anyone can get head lice. Having head lice does not mean a person has poor personal hygiene or lives in an unclean environment. Anyone who has hair can get head lice.

Head lice are commonly spread among children and adults who have close head-to-head contact. Head lice cannot jump or fly from 1 person to another. They are most commonly spread through head-to-head contact by crawling from one hair to another. There is a very small chance of head lice spreading indirectly through shared pillowcases, hair accessories, brushes, and combs.

How do I prevent the spread of head lice?

Head lice can best be controlled through the cooperation of parents, children, daycares, schools, and health care providers. Checking the hair of all family members weekly using the wet combing method is the best way to prevent the spread. Children should be encouraged not to share hats, combs, hair accessories, or hairbrushes. If your child has long hair, tie it up or put it in a braid.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

Often people who have head lice will have no symptoms for 4 to 6 weeks with their first case. Symptoms of head lice may include:

- crawling or tickling sensation on the scalp;
- itchy scalp due to an allergic reaction caused by the bites; and
- scratch marks or small red bumps like a rash.

How can I tell if my child has head lice?

The most accurate way to check for head lice is the wet combing method:

- Wash and rinse the hair. Apply enough conditioner to cover the whole scalp (usually 2 handfuls). The conditioner stops the lice from moving, making them easy to find.
- Use a wide tooth comb to get the tangles out. At any time if the comb tugs, add more conditioner.
- Begin combing the entire head with a lice comb. Pull the comb through the hair in one stroke from the front to the back of the head. Keep the teeth in contact with the scalp for the entire stroke.
- After each stroke, wipe the comb on a paper towel and check for lice.

If no lice are found, repeat the above process weekly as part of your family's hygiene routine. Having head lice once does not prevent someone from getting them again.

What are safe options for treating head lice?

Treatment should be considered only if live lice are found. Head lice will not go away without treatment.

If one person in the household has head lice, there is a good chance other household members do as well. All members of the household should be checked on the same day and those with lice should be treated.

There are many different products and ways to treat head lice. Some health experts recommend wet combing and others recommend chemical treatments.

Wet Combing treatment

This method removes live head lice. Wet combing is less expensive and non-chemical. Combing treatments are done following the same steps used to check for lice. Any young lice, that hatch from eggs after the first session are removed at the second, third and fourth sessions. This is why it is important to do the full series of sessions. Use generous amounts of hair conditioner and a special lice comb, every 4 days for at least 2 weeks. If lice are found on the final combing, add one more combing in 4 days until no live lice are found.

Wet combing is safe for infants, young children, as well as pregnant and nursing mothers. Contact your public health unit at www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/partners/health-authorities/regional-health-authorities for complete instructions on the wet combing method.

Chemical treatments

Non-prescription products – Shampoos, creams, rinses and sprays that contain an ingredient that kills lice are available at most pharmacies without a prescription. Some examples are permethrin, pyrethrins, isopropyl myristate, and dimethicone.

These products may not be appropriate for children or adults of all ages, so speak to your health care provider or pharmacist to find out which is best for you or your child. Always carefully follow the directions for use on the label.

After treatment, the hair should be checked and eggs and lice should be removed. The nits may also be removed, although you don't have to remove them, as nits are empty eggshells.

Most treatments are repeated in 7 to 10 days to make sure that any head lice that have hatched after the first treatment are killed before they have a chance to lay any eggs. It is also important to check the head for any eggs and remove them after the second treatment. Itching may last for 7 to 10 days, even after successful treatment.

Head lice have started to develop resistance to many of the chemical products. If you think the product is not working after 24 to 48 hours, use the wet combing method to check for lice. If lice are found, use a different treatment method. Head lice cannot develop resistance to non-chemical treatments.

The medications should be kept out of the reach of young children. Some medications cannot be used for infants, young children, pregnant or nursing mothers and should only be used following advice from a health care provider.

Children should receive their first treatment, whether wet combing or chemical, at home the first day that they are found to have head lice. Children should not be sent home or kept home from school or daycare because of head lice. The child should be encouraged to avoid head-to-head contact with other students until after their first wet combing or chemical treatment. Parents should check their child weekly for head lice using the wet combing method.

Confidentiality should be maintained in order not to embarrass a child or family who has head lice.

When should I call my health care provider?

Call your health care provider if the treatments are not successful. Chemical treatment of pregnant or nursing mothers and of children less than 4 years of age should be given only under the direction of a health care provider.

What options are not recommended for treating head lice?

Methods and products that should not be used because they are either not safe or do not work include: insect sprays, motor oil, gasoline, alcohol, flea soap, dyes, bleaches, heat applied to the scalp, garlic, tea tree and other essential oils, electric lice combs, and shaving the head.

What should be cleaned?

Healthy head lice rarely leave the scalp and if they do they may only survive for 24 to 55 hours. Head lice are not shared through contact with furniture, pets or carpets. There is no evidence that a major cleaning of the house or car is necessary. Hats, pillowcases, combs, and hairbrushes that have had contact with the head of the person with head lice in the previous 3 days, could be considered for cleaning in hot soapy water. Also clean supplies that you used for wet combing in hot soapy water.

Want More Information?

HealthLink BC, your provincial health line, is as close as your phone or the web any time of the day or night, every day of the year.

Call **8-1-1** toll-free in B.C., or for the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**.

You can speak with a health service navigator, who can also connect you with a:

- registered nurse any time, every day of the year;
- registered dietitian from 9am to 5pm PT, Monday to Friday;
- qualified exercise professional from 9am to 5pm PT, Monday to Friday;
- pharmacist from 5pm to 9am PT, every day of the year.

Translation services are available in more than 130 languages.

8-1-1 in 130 Languages

When you dial **8-1-1** (or **7-1-1** for the deaf and hard of hearing), you can request health information services in languages other than English.

Translation services are available in over 130 languages.

After dialing **8-1-1**, you will be connected with an English speaking health service navigator. To get service in another language, simply state the language you are looking for (example say “Punjabi”), and an interpreter will