

# CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL FACT SHEET

## Head Lice Infestation

### **What are head lice?**

Also called *Pediculus humanus capitis* (peh-DICK-you-lus HUE-man-us CAP-ih-TUS), head lice are parasitic insects found on the heads of people. Having head lice is very common. However, there are no reliable data on how many people get head lice in the United States each year.

### **Who is at risk for getting head lice?**

Anyone who comes in close contact (especially head-to-head contact) with someone who already has head lice is at greatest risk. Occasionally, head lice may be acquired from contact with clothing (such as hats, scarves, coats) or other personal items (such as brushes or towels) that belong to an infested person. Preschool and elementary-age children, 3-11, and their families are infested most often. Girls get head lice more often than boys, women more than men. In the United States, African-Americans rarely get head lice. Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with getting head lice.

### **What do head lice look like?**

There are three forms of lice: the egg (also called a nit), the nymph, and the adult.

**Nit:** Nits are head lice eggs. They are very small, about the size of a knot in thread, hard to see, and are often confused for dandruff or hair spray droplets. Nits are laid by the adult female at the base of the hair shaft nearest the scalp. They are firmly attached to the hair shaft. They are oval and usually yellow to white. Nits take about 1 week to hatch. Eggs that are likely to hatch are usually located within ¼ inch of the scalp.

**Nymph:** The nit hatches into a baby louse called a nymph. It looks like an adult head louse, but smaller. Nymphs mature into adults about 7 days after hatching. To live, the nymph must feed on blood.

**Adult:** The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs, and is tan to grayish-white. In persons with dark hair, the adult louse will look darker. Females, which are usually larger than the males, lay eggs. Adult lice can live up to 30 days on a person's head. To live, adult lice need to feed on blood. If the louse falls off a person, it dies within 2 days.

### **Where are head lice most commonly found?**

They are most commonly found on the scalp, behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the neck. Head lice hold on to hair with hook-like claws found at the end of each of their six legs. Head lice are rarely found on the body, eyelashes, or eyebrows.

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

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites.
- Irritability.
- Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected.

### **How did my child get head lice?**

Contact with an already infested person is the most common way to get head lice. Head-to-head contact is common during play at school and at home (sports activities, on a playground, slumber parties, at camp). Less commonly,

- Wearing clothing, such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, or hair ribbons, recently worn by an infested person.

- Using infested combs, brushes, or towels.
- Lying on a bed, couch, pillow, carpet, or stuffed animal that has recently been in contact with an infested person.

**How is head lice infestation diagnosed?**

An infestation is diagnosed by looking closely through the hair and scalp for nits, nymphs, or adults. Finding a nymph or adult may be difficult; there are usually few of them and they can move quickly from searching fingers. If crawling lice are not seen, finding nits within a 1/4 inch of the scalp confirms that a person is infested and should be treated. If you only find nits more than 1/4 inch from the scalp (and don't see a nymph or adult louse), the infestation is probably an old one and does not need to be treated. If you are not sure if a person has head lice, the diagnosis should be made by your health care provider, school nurse, or a professional from the local health department or agricultural extension service.

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. If you have any questions about the disease described above or think that you may have a parasitic infection, consult a health care provider.*  
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## **Pediculosis** **(head lice, body lice, pubic lice, cooties, crabs)**

### **What is pediculosis?**

Pediculosis is an infestation of the hairy parts of the body or clothing with eggs, larvae or adult lice. The crawling stages of this insect feed on human blood which can result in severe itching. Head lice are usually located on the scalp; crab lice are located in the pubic area; and body lice live along seams of clothing but travel to the skin to feed. Animal lice are different and do not live and breed on humans.

### **Who gets pediculosis?**

Anyone may become louse infested under suitable conditions of exposure. Pediculosis is easily transmitted from person to person during direct contact. Head lice infestations are frequently found in school settings or institutions. Crab lice are most often sexually transmitted. Body lice infestations can be found in people living in crowded, unsanitary conditions where clothing is infrequently changed or laundered.

### **How is pediculosis spread?**

For both head lice and body lice, transmission can occur during direct contact with an infested individual. Sharing of clothing and combs or brushes may also result in transmission of these insects. While other means are possible, crab lice are most often transmitted through sexual contact.

### **What are the symptoms of pediculosis?**

Usually the first indication of an infestation is the itching or scratching in the area of the body where the lice feed. Scratching at the back of the head or around the ears should lead to an examination for head louse eggs (nits) on the hair. Itching around the genital area should lead to an examination for crab lice or their eggs. Scratching can be sufficiently intense to result in secondary bacterial infection in these areas.

### **How soon do symptoms appear?**

It may take as long as two to three weeks or longer for a person to notice the intense itching associated with this infestation.

### **For how long is a person able to spread pediculosis?**

For head lice, as long as lice or eggs remain alive on the infested person's hair. For body lice, as long as lice or eggs remain alive on clothing.

### **What is the treatment for pediculosis?**

Medicated shampoos or cream rinses containing pyrethrins are used to kill lice. Products containing pyrethrin are available over-the-counter. Retreatment after seven to 10 days is recommended to assure that no eggs have survived. Nit combs are available to help

remove nits from hair. Dose and duration of shampoo treatment should be followed according to label instructions.

Head lice and nit removal may be facilitated by:

1. Applying a damp towel to the scalp for 30 to 60 minutes and combing with a fine-toothed nit comb designed for this purpose.
2. Soaking the hair with white vinegar (3% to 5% acetic acid) and then applying a damp towel soaked in the same solution for 30 to 60 minutes followed by nit combing.
3. It is important to go through the entire head of hair daily for 2 weeks to make sure that all lice and nits are removed. If nits do not come off easily with a nit comb, remove with your fingernails. If any nits survive the treatment, they can hatch and begin the infestation again.

**What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of pediculosis?**

1. Avoid physical contact with infested individuals and their belongings, especially clothing, headgear and bedding.
2. Health education on the life history of lice, proper treatment and the importance of laundering clothing and bedding in hot water (130 degrees for 20 minutes) or dry cleaning to destroy lice and eggs is extremely valuable.
3. When indicated, it is important to inspect children for head lice and body lice, particularly children in schools, institutions, and summer camps.