

# HEAD LICE - Fact sheet

Head lice are a nuisance, but not a health hazard. Anyone can get head lice. People do not get head lice because they are not clean. Children often get lice because they are frequently in head-to-head contact with other children. Lice can be easily passed from child to child, child to adult, adult to adult.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Head lice are tiny, flat insects. They cannot jump or fly, but they can crawl quickly. They are 1-2 mm long, greyish-white in colour, and hard to see.

An adult female louse (adult lice) can lay hundreds of eggs. The very tiny eggs, called nits, are half the size of a pinhead. They look like dandruff, and are firmly glued to the hair close to the scalp and cannot be flicked off. Head lice do not live long and their eggs hatch near the warm scalp in 7 to 10 days.

Itching and scratching are common signs of head lice, however there may be no symptoms at all. Since other scalp conditions also cause itching, the best way to check for lice is to look for nits. If you find nits, act quickly.

## HOW TO GET RID OF LICE

If you find lice or nits a Pharmaceutical treatment shampoo or creme rinse is the most proven method for getting rid of lice. The most important step towards successful treatment is to REMOVE ALL THE NITS. It is not necessary to treat someone just because they have been exposed to lice. Treat only those people who actually have live lice.

## TREATMENT OPTIONS

### I. Pharmaceutical Treatment

Lice treatment shampoos or creme rinses can be purchased at the drug store without a prescription from a doctor. In most provinces these products are available directly from your pharmacist. It is important to speak to your Pharmacist if you have any questions.

#### 1. Consult with your doctor regarding treatment:

- of children under age 2.
- of persons with seizure disorders.
- for lice on eyebrows, eyelashes or beards.
- if the skin of the scalp is broken or infected.
- of persons with asthma, allergies or cancer.
- of persons who are pregnant or breastfeeding.

You can also call Motherisk at the Hospital for Sick Children at 416-813-6780 for information.

#### 2. When Choosing a product, read the list of contents.

Do not use a product if the person being treated is allergic to any of listed ingredients. Follow the directions very carefully.

Pyrethrins with synergized piperonyl butoxide (e.g. R&C™ Shampoo+Conditioner) should not be used for anyone with a known allergy to ragweed, chrysanthemums, synthetic pyrethroids, or pyrethrin.

Permethrin (e.g. Kwellada-P® Creme Rinse and NIX™ Creme Rinse) should not be used on a person with a known allergy to chrysanthemums, synthetic pyrethroids, or pyrethrin.

*Do not use on children under age 2 unless directed by a physician.*

#### 3. Using Head Lice products

- Follow lice treatment instructions exactly, some products are applied to dry hair, others to wet.
- Timing is important. If the product is rinsed off too soon, lice and eggs may not be killed. If left on too long, you are causing unnecessary chemical exposure.
- Rinse the child's hair under a tap (instead of the shower or bathtub) to limit skin exposure and prevent the child from swallowing the product.
- These products should not be used near the eyes, nose or mouth. Hold a towel tightly over the eyes to protect them during treatment.
- When treating another person wear plastic or rubber gloves and wash your hands well.
- Store unused head lice products in a safe area away from the reach of young children.

## 4. Second Treatments

- Head lice products kill the head lice and many of the eggs. One treatment usually does not kill all the eggs. Apply a second treatment in 7 to 10 days to kill any newly hatched lice before they can lay eggs. Repeat the treatment once only.
- Remove ALL the nits and remember to check the head regularly (see *Removal nits*).

If head lice persist following two treatments and reinfestation has been ruled out consult your physician or local pharmacist.

## II. Alternative Treatment

Home remedies or frequent washing with regular shampoo are not effective in getting rid of head lice. As with all lice treatments, remember to remove all nits (see Removal of Nits).

### **Caution:**

- Do not leave child unattended with a shower cap or saran wrap on their head.
- Do not leave the shower cap or saran wrap on while sleeping.
- Do not use vinegar on the scalp if it is already irritated.

## REMOVAL OF NITS

- The removal of all nits will take several hours.
- Have your child sit in a comfortable chair and find an activity to occupy them (e.g. watching a movie)
- Work in bright, natural light to help see the nits.
- Comb the wet hair with a regular comb to remove tangles.
- Divide the hair into sections and pin back the sections not being worked on, like a hairdresser does.
- Use your thumbnail against your first finger to strip the nits from the hair. Start at the root of the strand of hair and pull out to the end of the strand of hair.
- Place the nits in a bag or a cup of water.
- Remove all nits from the strand of hair.
- As an alternative, you can comb out the nits using a special comb for removing nits (i.e. comb teeth are less than 0.3 mm apart. This is easier following treatment with a lice product.
- Continue until all nits are removed.
- Check the hair each day. If you find additional nits (3-5 per day) this may be a sign that live lice are still on the head.
- Be sure to pay close attention to the back of the neck and behind the ears (lice like these areas because it is warm).

## CLOSE CONTACTS

Close contacts may include family members, grandparents, close friends, neighbours, or babysitters. Close contacts and family members should be checked and treated if infested. Tell your child's school or childcare centre so other parents can be told to check their children's heads. If close contacts have lice ensure that they are treated at the same time so they do not pass the lice back to you or your child leading to reinfestation.

## CLEANING PERSONAL ITEMS

When you are treating for lice you need to wash combs and brushes, head gear, hats, jackets, pillowcases, sheets, and towels with hot water. The heat of the water and/or the hot cycle of your clothes dryer will kill any live lice or nits. Any items, which cannot be washed, should be placed in a plastic bag and sealed for 2 weeks.

## POINTS TO REMEMBER

- An untreated person among close contacts can pass lice back to you or your child.
- Head lice do not live on dogs, cats or other animals, only on humans.
- Keeping hair short will not prevent head lice.
- Check young school age children regularly for head lice especially if there is an outbreak.
- Discourage children from sharing hats, scarves, combs, hair accessories and helmets.

*For more information please visit  
[www.liceguide.com](http://www.liceguide.com) or [www.lice.ca](http://www.lice.ca) or contact your local Public Health Department.*