

A Family Guide for Head Lice Management

Manitowoc Public School District Nursing Team

Overview

Head lice is a common community problem, often found among children ages 3 to 11 years old. When head lice is discovered, the infestation has already been present for about 3 weeks. Though a head lice infestation is often spotted at school, it is usually acquired elsewhere, such as at sleepovers or camp, where head-to-head contact is more likely.

Head lice do not transmit diseases, nor are they dangerous. Despite what you may have heard, head lice often infest those with good hygiene and grooming habits. People in your family or community may experience head lice and for this reason, it's important to know some of the basics. This includes how to recognize symptoms and what to do if faced with a head lice infestation.

What are head lice?

Head lice are wingless insects that live close to the human scalp and feed on human blood. When checking for head lice, you may see several forms: the nit, the nymph or the adult louse.



Nits are tiny lice eggs that are often yellow or white in color. Nits are attached to the hair shaft and often found around the ears or nape of the neck. Nits look similar to dandruff but are not easily brushed off.



Nymphs (baby lice) are small and grow to adult size in 1 to 2 weeks.



Adult lice are the size of a sesame seed and appear tan to gray in color.

How do head lice spread?

- ❖ Head lice crawl, they do not jump or fly
- ❖ Head lice are mostly spread by head-to-head contact
- ❖ Head lice can spread by contact with personal items (hats, scarves, combs) but this is uncommon
- ❖ Transmission is more likely to occur at home or in the community than at school

What are the signs of lice infestation?

- ❖ **Tickling** feeling on the scalp or in hair
- ❖ **Itching** (caused by louse bites)
- ❖ **Difficulty sleeping** (lice are more active in the dark)
- ❖ **Sores on the head** (caused by scratching)

Finding a live louse on the scalp is an indication of an active infestation. They are most commonly found behind the ears or near the neckline at the back of the head.

What if my child gets head lice?

If you suspect your child has head lice, there are a variety of over-the-counter treatments available. Correct choice and application of a product containing **permethrin (1%)** is the most important part of the treatment plan. Ask your pharmacist for assistance in locating these products if you are unsure.

➤ It is recommended that the treatment be done over a sink, not in the shower. Remove any clothing that may become wet or stained.

➤ Read all instructions on the label and **apply as directed**.

➤ Using a nit comb (usually found in the product box), comb any remaining lice out of the hair. Be thorough, working with small segments of hair at a time. Do not wash or condition hair for 1-2 days after treating with the lice product as this may decrease the effectiveness.

➤ If you notice that 12 hours after treatment, there are no dead lice and the lice seem to be just as active as before, do NOT retreat! Contact your child's healthcare provider for further directions as the medicine may not be working.

➤ Use the nit comb every 1-3 days to comb out any remaining lice and nits. This will decrease the chance of self-reinfestation. Most products recommend retreating again 7-10 days after the first treatment. Please follow product recommendations.

➤ Continue to comb and check the scalp for 2-3 weeks to be sure all lice and nits are gone.

➤ All household members should also be checked and those with evidence of an active infestation should be treated at the same time.

➤ Family bed linens and recently used clothing, hats and towels should be washed in hot water and dried on a high heat setting. Items that cannot be easily washed (plush toys) should be sealed in a plastic bag for 2 weeks.

➤ Vacuum floors, furniture and automobile seats.

➤ Personal articles, such as combs and hair ties, should be soaked in hot water for 10 minutes if they were exposed to someone with an active head lice infestation.

