

HEAD LICE

What are head lice?

Head lice (*Pediculus humanus capitis*) are found worldwide, including New Brunswick. Head lice are insects that live close to the human scalp and feed on blood. They are a nuisance but head lice do not transmit disease. Parents are often embarrassed if they discover that their children have contracted head lice, but research has shown that these parasites do not indicate low socio-economic status or poor personal hygiene. Anyone can get head lice.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom is constant itching of the scalp. This may be accompanied by scratch marks or small red lesions resembling a rash on the head. There may also be a tickling feeling of something moving in the hair. Head lice are most active in the dark and can cause difficulty sleeping and irritability.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice move by crawling; they cannot hop or fly. Head lice are usually spread by direct hair-to-hair contact or infrequently by sharing things like hats, scarves, combs, hairbrushes, helmets and headphones. Head lice that live on people can't live on pets like cats or dogs.

How are head lice diagnosed?

Head lice have three forms: egg (or nit), nymph, and adult. Nits are laid at the base of the hair shaft closest to the scalp. Nits are firmly attached to the hair, are oval-shaped and very small (about the size of a knot in thread). Nits appear yellow or white or sometimes as the same color as the hair of the infested person. Nits are often confused with dandruff or remnants of hair spray; but debris is not usually firmly attached to the hair.



Nits hatch into nymphs in 8 to 9 days.

Nymphs look like adult lice but are smaller. They mature into adults in 9 to 12 days. Adult lice are the size of a sesame seed, have six legs, and are tan to grayish-white in color. They live for up to 30 days on a person's head, but die within one or two days after falling off.

Infestations are diagnosed by finding adults, nymphs or viable eggs. A magnifying lens, good lighting and a fine-toothed comb are useful. Head lice and nits are found on the scalp, particularly around and behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the head. Viable nits are firmly attached to hair usually within 1 cm of the scalp. Viable nits contain an embryo that occupies most of the egg and often one or two eye spots are visible. Hatched nits are nearly transparent and are usually more than 1 cm from the scalp. If you suspect head lice ask a reliable source (your health care provider or someone familiar with head lice) to help confirm the problem.

Who is at risk of infestation?

Infestation with head lice is most common among preschool children attending child care, elementary schoolchildren, and the household members of infested children.

How can head lice be prevented?

Learn how to diagnose head lice and do regular inspections of children and family members. Check children when they return from overnight camps and school trips. During outbreaks, keep long hair tied back or braided to minimize hair-to-hair contact and discourage borrowing personal items like hats and hairbrushes.

How are head lice treated?

Head lice can be treated with an over-the-counter or prescription medication, usually as a shampoo. A health care provider can help select an appropriate medication. Treatment should be considered only for active infestations (adults, nymphs or viable nits are observed). Some steps to follow:

1. Check household members and other close contacts and treat those with an active infestation.
2. Treat all infested family members at the same time. Follow medication directions closely.
3. Retreat. A single treatment may not kill all the eggs. Retreatment usually should occur after seven to ten days to kill any lice hatched from surviving eggs before they produce new eggs.
4. Repeated and thorough removal of lice and nits. Use a fine-toothed nit comb or fingers to remove all nits attached to hair shafts after treatment. Discard tissues or towel containing lice and nits. Clean combs and hair brushes by soaking in hot soapy water for twenty minutes or undiluted medicated shampoo for ten minutes. Continue to check for 2-3 weeks to be sure all lice and nits are gone.

In addition to medicated shampoos, other measures can be used but these are not required to treat a head lice infestation. Hats, scarves, pillow cases, bedding, clothing, and towels used by the infested person can be machine washed and dried using hot water and hot air cycles. Items may be dry-cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag for two weeks. Vacuum the floor and furniture, particularly where the infested person sat or lay.

What is the Public Health response?

If you have head lice it is important to tell family members, day care operators or schools principals so family members and other children can be checked and treated if necessary.

Further Information

For additional information, contact your health-care provider, local Public Health office or Tele-Care 811.