

Head Lice



Communicable Disease
Program

McHenry County
Department of Health

MCDH

Head Lice: Facts

- Lice have been our companions since ancient times & have so befriended us, they can't live without us.
- Head lice don't discriminate based on economic, ethnic, or cultural group. **Headlice prefer Clean heads**
- Lice don't jump, hop, skip or fly.
- Lice are host specific parasites so human lice don't live on other animals such as dogs or cats.
- Lice must feed off scalp, so they die within 24 to 72 hours of separation from human hosts; if they have fallen off hair, they are at the end of the life cycle.

Head Lice: Facts

- A head louse is an insect that lives on the human scalp and feeds on blood.
- Head lice hatch from small eggs (nits) that are attached with a cement-like substance to the shaft of individual hairs.
- Eggs hatch in about 10 days. Once hatched, the head louse matures in less than 2 weeks.
- Female head lice may survive for as much as a month (most seem to perish sooner). Those more than about 2 weeks old increasingly become geriatric and tend to produce fewer eggs and less viable eggs.
- If nits are present, head lice have already been there—but may be long gone.

Head Lice: Facts

- Most head louse infestations seem to cause little, if any, direct harm.
- Head lice are not known to naturally transmit microbes that cause disease.
- Headlice are not life threatening
- The greatest harm associated with head lice results from the well-intentioned but misguided use of caustic or toxic substances to eliminate the lice.
- Schools are not the most common places where head lice are spread; sleepovers are thought to be a common source of transmission.

Head Lice: How do we get them?

- **The most common means of transmission is through physical/direct (head to head) contact!!**
- Indirect transmission is uncommon but may occur via *shared* combs, brushes, hats, and hair accessories that have been in contact with an infested person.
- Schools are not thought to be a common source of transmission.

Head Lice: Treatment

- **The most effective method for control of head lice is screening at home by parents, treatment if necessary, and removal of nits**

Images to assist in the identification of head lice and their eggs.

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html>



Adult female louse on nit comb



Viable egg on hair ~2 days old



Viable egg ~1 day before hatching

c 2000 President and Fellows of Harvard College



Empty egg (hatched)



Dead egg (>2 weeks old)



'Pseudo-nit' (Debris often confused as eggs)

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Checking for Headlice

- Lice are most common around ears and nape of neck
- Part the hair down the middle, from the crown to the nape of the neck.
- Check the part for eggs on the hair shaft (small white specks attached to the hair shaft) or adult lice.
- The eggs will be well attached and should only be able to be removed by scraping off the hair with your finger nail.



Checking for Headlice

- Once the first section is checked, part the hair either to the left or right of your original part in very small sections. Check this new parting for eggs and adult lice.
- Repeat this process throughout the entire the head, paying extra attention to the warmer spots at the nape, hairline and close to the ears.

Head Lice Treatment

- **Environmental cleaning** is advised, but remember: to treat headlice most effectively-concentrate on the head.
- **Environmental cleaning:** Vacuum carpeting and furniture and car. Remember to through away vacuum cleaner bag.
- **Environmental:** Wash sheets in hot water and dry in hot dryer.
- Bag items for 2 weeks that can't be washed (stuffed animals)
- Tip: When kids come home from school; - toss coat in hot dryer:

Head Lice: Treatment

- Only family members with lice should be treated
- There are several treatments; including alternatives (olive oil; mayonnaise)
- Spraying your home for lice is not advised; it exposes family members to unnecessary pesticides
- Using Kerosene as an alternative treatment is unsafe

What schools and parents need to know in response

- We need to *educate* students, families, and ourselves based on fact and not fear.
- Encourage parents to teach children not to share personal items
- Don't let head lice interfere with students' opportunities to learn and achieve *in the classroom*. Missing school puts a child at risk for failure.

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)

- **Information about head lice shall be sent home to all parents/guardians at the beginning of the school year and at Regular intervals. (In parent handbook, school newsletters)**
- **Head lice screening programs in schools do not have a significant effect on the incidence of head lice. Parent education is probably most important**
- **Staff shall maintain the privacy of students identified as having head lice.**

School Closing?

- American Academy of Pediatrics, Harvard School of Public Health and Centers for Disease Control state school closing for headlice outbreak is not necessary
- Are no nit policies necessary? American Academy of Pediatrics, Harvard School of Public Health, and National School Nurse Associations say “NO”

Brainstorming Solutions

- Parent Education meeting on checking heads and treatment
- PTO meeting to provide parents with training
- Reaching out to parents who are unable to check heads or cannot afford treatment

Scientific Resources

- NASN pediculosis position statement
<http://www.nasn.org/Default.aspx?tabid=237>
- AAP policy on head lice
<http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;110/3/638>
- Harvard School of Public Health
<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/lice/factsht_head_lice.htm