

Lice

Definition

Lice are tiny, wingless, parasitic insects that feed on your blood. Lice are easily spread — especially by schoolchildren — through close personal contact and by sharing belongings.

Several types of lice exist:

- ❑ **Head lice.** These lice develop on your scalp. They're easiest to see at the nape of your neck and over your ears.
- ❑ **Body lice.** These lice spend most of their time in the seams and folds of your clothing.

You or your child can have good personal hygiene habits and still get lice. Unless treated properly, this condition can become a recurring problem. **Please seek medical treatment if you suspect your child has lice.**

Symptoms

A picture of a live head louse on a girl's head, with a red circle around the louse and a caption to make identification. (from Pediatrics.about.com)



Signs and symptoms of lice include:

- ❑ Intense itching. Lice on the scalp, the body, clothing, or other body hair. Lice can be 0.08 to 0.16 inches (2 to 4 millimeters) in size.
- ❑ Lice eggs (nits) on hair shafts. Nits resemble tiny pussy willow buds. Nits can be mistaken for dandruff, but unlike dandruff, they can't be easily brushed out of hair.
- ❑ Small, red bumps on the scalp, neck and shoulders.

Causes

You can get lice by coming into contact with either lice or their eggs. Eggs hatch in about one week. Lice can't fly or walk on the ground. They spread by:

- ❑ **Head-to-head or body-to-body contact.** This may occur as children or family members play or interact closely.
- ❑ **Close proximity of stored belongings.** Storing infected clothing in closets, lockers or on side-by-side hooks at school, or storing personal items such as pillows, blankets, combs and stuffed toys in close proximity at home can permit lice to spread.
- ❑ **Sharing items.** These may include clothing, headphones, brushes, combs, hair decorations, towels, blankets, pillows and stuffed toys.
- ❑ **Contact with contaminated furniture.** Lying on a bed, sitting in furniture or even using a toilet seat recently used by someone infected with lice can spread them. Head lice live for up to two days off the body.

Prevention

It's difficult to prevent the spread of head lice among children in child care and school settings. There's so much close contact among children and their belongings that lice can spread easily. It's no reflection on your hygiene habits or those of your children, and it's not a failure on your part as a parent if your child gets head lice. The best approach is simply to take thorough steps to get rid of the lice — and their eggs — so that you don't have more lice to deal with.

Ask your child not to share personal belongings such as:

- ❑ Hats
- ❑ Scarves
- ❑ Coats
- ❑ Combs
- ❑ Brushes
- ❑ Hair decorations
- ❑ Headphones

However, it's not realistic to expect that you and your child can eliminate all the types of contact that may result in the spread of lice.

Your child may have nits in his or her hair but not necessarily develop a case of head lice. Some nits are empty eggs. However, nits that are found within 1/4 inch of the scalp should be treated — even if you find only one — to prevent the possibility of hatching. Nits that are farther away from the scalp are probably from an old infestation and don't need to be treated.

Lifestyle and home remedies

You can get rid of lice with a patient, thorough approach that involves cleaning yourself or your child and any personal belongings that may be contaminated.

These steps may help you eliminate lice infestations:

- ❑ **Use lotions and shampoos.** Choose from among several over-the-counter lotions and shampoos (Nix, Rid, others) designed to kill lice. Apply the product according to package instructions. You may need to repeat treatment with the lotion or shampoo in seven to 10 days. These lotions and shampoos typically aren't recommended for children under age 2.
- ❑ **After shampoo treatment, rinse your hair with vinegar.** Grasp a lock of hair with a cloth saturated with vinegar and strip the lock downward to remove nits. Repeat until you've treated all the hair in this way. Or soak hair with vinegar and leave it on for a few minutes before combing. Then towel-dry the hair. These methods can help remove nits from the hair shaft. Cutting hair very short also can help.
- ❑ **Comb wet hair.** Use a fine-toothed or nit comb to physically remove the lice from wet hair. Repeat every three to four days for at least two weeks. This method may be used in combination with other treatments and is usually recommended as the first-line treatment for children under age 2.
- ❑ **Wash contaminated items.** Wash bedding, stuffed animals, clothing and hats with hot, soapy water — at least 130 F (54 C) — and dry them at high heat for at least 20 minutes.
- ❑ **Vacuum.** Give the floor and furniture a good vacuuming.
- ❑ **Wash combs and brushes.** Use very hot, soapy water — at least 130 F (54 C) — or soak them in rubbing alcohol for an hour.

References:

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