

FACT SHEET

Head Lice

Head lice are parasites which infest hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes.

Cause: The louse, a small, flat wingless insect, responsible for human head lice is *Pediculus humanus var. capitis*.

Symptoms: The major complaint of head lice infestation is severe itching of the scalp. Scratching leads to abrasions which can become infected with bacteria. The secondary bacterial infections are characterized by weeping and crusting of the scalp.

Spread: The louse is spread by direct and indirect contact with an infested person. Indirect contact includes using the same hair brush or comb as an infested person. Human head louse can be passed person-to-person for as long as the lice or egg remain alive.

Incubation: The human head louse has a three stage life cycle: nits, nymphs, and adults.

The nits (eggs), are laid by fertilized adult females and are firmly glued to body hair or clothing. After seven to ten days, nymphs emerge from the eggs.

The nymphs must feed within 24 hours to survive. Depending on the temperature, the nymphal stage lasts 7 to 13 days. Fertilized females produce 250 to 300 eggs over the next three to four weeks before dying.

The eggs and adults can survive for about seven to ten days without feeding.

Contagious Period:

As long as lice or eggs remain alive on the infested person. The adult lice life span is about 1 month; nits remain viable on clothing for 1 month. Body and head lice remain alive for a week without feeding off the host.

Precaution: For 24 hours after effective treatment is initiated.

Diagnosis and Treatment:

By looking closely through the hair and scalp for nits, nymphs, or adults. If crawling lice are not seen, finding nits within a 1/4 inch of the scalp confirms that a person is infested and should be treated.

Several treatments (pediculocides) are available that are effective against head lice. The treatments include:

- 1% lindane (Kwell® , not recommended for pregnant or nursing women, infants and young children),
- pyrethrin liquid with piperonyl butoxide (RID®, A-200 Pyrinat®), and
- 1% permethrin creme rinse (Nix®).

Lindane is the only treatment that requires a prescription, but it does not offer an advantage over the other agents. Pyrethrin is a plant extract from chrysanthemums. Permethrin is a synthetic drug with a greater activity against head lice than pyrethrin.

Nits should be removed by applying a solution of equal parts of vinegar and water and then combing the hair with a fine-toothed comb that was dipped in vinegar. Combs and brushes should be soaked in a pediculicide for one hour. Bedding and clothing should be washed in hot water, dry cleaned, or dried with settings set at hot cycle to destroy eggs and lice.

Prevention: Avoid direct and indirect contact with infested people. For children in a group setting, directly inspect for head lice regularly.