

SAGINAW COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
PERSONAL AND PREVENTIVE HEALTH SERVICE

Information and Treatment for Head Lice

Head lice continue to be a problem in our society. Lice are highly communicable, but can be controlled with frequent head checks and consistent follow-up. This information is intended to help you identify and treat head lice safely and thoroughly.

WHAT ARE HEAD LICE?

Head lice are small insects about the size of a sesame seed. They are a parasite living on the head and feeding on human blood. This often leads to symptoms of itching the scalp and/or a rash. Lice are usually brownish, but can vary in color depending on factors such as their development or when they've had their last meal. They crawl quickly (DO NOT jump or fly) and shy away from light, making them difficult to see.

Diagnosis of head lice is more often made on the basis of finding their eggs, called nits. Nits are tiny, tan colored, oval speckles attached to the hair shafts. As the female louse lays her eggs (3-5 per day), she cements them to the hair and unlike dandruff, they will not wash off or blow away. Nits can be found throughout the hair, but they are most often located at the nape of the neck, behind the ears, and at the crown area. It helps to use a magnifying glass and have adequate lighting when looking for nits. Natural light (sunlight) is a good choice if home lighting is dim.

Lice must feed every five hours to survive, and will not survive more than 24-48 hours if off the human head. However, nits can survive for up to 10 days away from the head, and may hatch with the proper heat and humidity. Life expectancy for a louse is 30 days, but a case of lice continues due to hatching of nits.

HOW DO YOU GET LICE?

Lice are transmitted by direct head-to-head contact with infested persons, by wearing infested clothing, or by using an infested comb or brush. They do NOT live on pets.

HOW DO YOU TREAT HEAD LICE?

Before one family member is treated, ALL members of the household should be examined. ALL household members with evidence of lice or nits should be treated on the same day with a lice treatment product that can be purchased over-the-counter at pharmacy or retail stores. You may also see your family physician to receive head lice treatment with a prescription. It is important to follow the product label directions very carefully to ensure effectiveness and safety. None of the products are 100% effective in killing lice and nits, and there have been studies indicating that lice are developing increased resistance to the current products on the market. The following treatment can be used safely in cases where multiple head lice treatments have been used or there is a contraindication to use of the products, i.e. allergies, age less than two, open sores on the scalp, pregnancy, or adverse reaction with previous use.

TREATMENT WITH CONDITIONER:

1. GETTING READY- YOU WILL NEED:

- A fine-toothed comb designed for nit removal. A metal comb is less flexible than plastic ones and may be more effective at removing nits.
- Bobby pins or hair clips (for long hair)
- A large towel to place around the shoulders during combing
- A wide bowl of water with a squirt of dishwashing liquid or access to a sink nearby.

Combing should be done in a well-lighted area. Seat the individual so his/her head is just below eye level. It might be a good idea to have something fun with which to entertain children while you are combing e.g. books, modeling clay, coloring, or videos.

2. PREPARING THE HAIR:

Generously cover dry hair with any type of conditioner, keeping the hair wet so combing is easier. Remove tangles with a regular hair comb. The conditioner “stuns” the louse and doesn’t allow it to crawl through the hair. It will not kill the lice, but helps with combing. However, it is non-toxic and can be reapplied as often as needed.

3. COMBING:

Separate a mass of hair about the width of the metal lice comb. It is important to separate the hair into small sections so you can see lice and nits more easily.

Hold the mass of hair with one hand. Insert the lice comb as close to the scalp as possible and gently pull the comb slowly through the hair several times. Check the hair carefully.

Comb one section at a time and check the comb for lice and nits. Pin the hair in a curl flat against the head and continue to another section of hair. Dip the comb in the soapy water and use a tissue to remove lice and debris. You may need to use a sewing needle or stiff toothbrush to clean the comb of nits. Make sure the comb is clean before you use it on the next section of hair. Continue combing until no lice or nits are found in the comb.

4. CLEAN UP:

Dispose of the soapy water down the drain and tissues in a trash bag. Sweep or vacuum around the area where nit removal took place. Launder the towel in hot water. Rinse the conditioner from the hair and dry. Clean the lice comb with a sewing needle or toothbrush and soak it in hot, boiling water for 15 minutes. The comb can then be used on another family member once it is cool and dry.

NIT REMOVAL:

ALL NITS SHOULD BE REMOVED OR REINFESTATION MAY OCCUR. Although it takes time and can sometimes be difficult, this is a KEY step in treatment, and all nits must be removed to ensure successful treatment. Hair must be free of lice and have no nits found ¼” or closer from the scalp before children may return to school or a childcare center. Since the nits are incubated by human body heat, those found closest to the scalp are most likely to hatch. Louse products rarely kill all the nits, and survivors may hatch into crawling lice within 7-10 days, generating a cycle of self-reinfestation. Dead nits or egg casings will cling to the hair and cause uncertainty about reinfestation. For these reasons, it is best not to guess if the nit is dead or alive and simply remove it. It is not necessary to cut the hair, but it may be helpful for removal of nits, and to make continued screening easier. **Continue to check for nits and/or comb for three weeks after the first treatment. Keep the lice comb as a tool to check for lice in the future.**

ENVIRONMENTAL TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

To assist in preventing reinfestation and spread to others, use the following steps:

1. All clothing, sheets, pillowcases, bedding, coats, hats, quilts, etc. which could have been in contact with the infested individual during the last week should be washed in HOT water (140 degrees F) and dried on high heat for at least 30 minutes. Items that can not be washed, can be stored in a tightly sealed garbage bag for a period of two weeks or may be placed in a freezer or outdoors when the temperature is below freezing for 24 hours. Clean and soak all combs, brushes, and cloth hair ties in HOT soapy water for 15 minutes.
2. Thoroughly vacuum all carpets, mattresses, furniture, and car seats. It is not necessary to purchase lice sprays. Vacuuming is less expensive and safer.
3. Notify the school, child care center, babysitters, friends, family, etc where others may have been in contact with the affected person(s) recently. Letting others know about the head lice will protect all children, including your own.
4. Head lice is easily passed from one person to another, especially among children. Teach children not to share combs, brushes, hats, headphones, scarves, coats, or clothing with others.
5. Keep long hair tightly braided or pulled back, and apply hair spray, oils, mousse, or gels to decrease the chance of transmission if head to head contact occurs.
6. Check your child's head frequently, especially when scratching is noticed.

References:

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www.headlice.org

11/03, rev. 11/04, rev. 1/07, rev. 10/10