

Head Lice Infestation -

condition health professionals call pediculosis - is exclusively a human problem and still quite common. It is easily transmitted from one person to another, and anyone can get it.

There are ways to treat lice, and the first step, of course, is early recognition.

How Do They Attack?

The head louse is just one of a whole family of lice, but this one chooses to live on the human scalp for its approximately one month of existence.

The adult female lays eggs (called nits) that are "cemented" to the hair shaft. Unlike dandruff, they cannot be "brushed off". In about a week, these nits hatch into lice and the cycle begins again.

Although parents are often embarrassed to discover that their children have lice, research has shown that these tiny insects (about 1/8 of an inch long) are not very selective about which scalp they infest. Anyone can get lice.

They cling to the hair shaft close to the scalp by means of six pairs of hooks and six powerful claws. They can spread relatively quickly from head to head, usually through close direct contact.

The lice puncture the scalp to obtain food, resulting in irritation and scratching, which in turn can cause infection.

Head lice are a source of annoyance and irritation and not a serious health hazard, nonetheless, recognition and medical treatment are important.

How Are Lice Spread?

Children are especially susceptible to head lice because they're grouped together more than adults. Lice are wingless insects; they cannot fly or jump. Other than close personal contact, lice may be spread through the sharing of personal articles such as hats and other headgear, hairbrushes, scarves, ribbons, and so on. You should discourage your children from sharing any personal items like these with their friends.

How Do I Check For Lice?

Because lice are tiny, mobile, and hard to spot, it's easier to look for their eggs (nits) rather than the bugs themselves. Live nits can be difficult to spot because they are tan-coloured and blend in with the hair. Dead nits are whitish, oval-shaped and tiny (about 1/3 the size of a sesame seed) and easier to see. The most popular area of settlement is behind the ears and at the nape of the neck. The use of a magnifying glass will help differentiate between dandruff and nits. If you do find nits, then lice are sure to be there as well.

How To Fight Back

Head lice can be treated easily as long as the following four steps are followed:

1. Check household members. Make sure that no other member of the family has lice by carefully examining each individual.
 2. Treat all infested family members at the same time. Unless you treat all members at once, the cycle will not be broken and lice will be passed from one family member to the next.
 3. Use two treatments of shampoo, 7 - 10 days apart. Despite claims on some lice control formulations, current evidence indicates that these products are not ovicidal (they do not kill the eggs that have not yet hatched). A second shampoo a week later will ensure that any lice that hatch after the first shampoo will be killed before they have a chance to lay any more eggs. Your pharmacist can help you select the proper medication.
- (Note: Consult your physician before using a product if you are pregnant, a nursing mother or for children 6 years of age or younger)*
4. Repeated and thorough use of a nit comb until all nits are removed. Available at the pharmacy, this comb will remove any dead nits and lice that are still attached to the hair shaft after the shampoo.

Preventing Reinfestation

Promptness is a real service to others. It is important to inform friends, family and school mates of anyone who is discovered to have head lice.

The key to eliminating head lice is to make sure two treatments are given and to check the heads of all household members after.

Head lice do not survive well off the scalp - they need regular feedings of human blood and will only survive in a narrow temperature range (30 - 32°C) and 70% humidity. They also have limited mobility off the hair, and pose little risk of infesting others through casual contact with furniture or carpeting. Hats and other headgear, coat collars, scarves, combs, brushes and hair ornaments as well as bedding should however be carefully cleaned. There is no evidence that a major cleanup of the household environment is necessary or effective in getting rid of head lice.

Once parents learn how to recognize the presence of head lice, regular inspection of their children's scalps is the best possible preventive measure.

If you have any further questions about head lice, please call your Public Health office.