

# Head Lice

Head lice are a nuisance but not a health hazard. They don't result from a lack of cleanliness. Anyone can get head lice. School children get them more often because they're in head-to-head contact more than adults. Parents can get head lice from their children. Sometimes the source is another adult in close contact with the children. Head lice crawl quickly from one person's head to another and multiply rapidly.

## What to look for

These tiny, flat insects have no wings and cannot jump or fly. Head lice live and breed on the hair of the head. They are only 1-2 mm (millimetres) long, greyish-brown colour, and hard to see. Adult female lice produce a great amount of nits.

Nits are very tiny eggs, half the size of a pinhead, and oval in shape. They may look like dandruff but they're firmly glued to the hair and can't be flicked off. New eggs, which are laid right next to the scalp, are tan to brown in colour and difficult to see. White nits more than 1 cm from the scalp have likely hatched or died. Head lice do not live long and their nits do not hatch away from the warmth and humidity of the scalp.

Itching and scratching are common signs of head lice. Sometimes there are no symptoms at all. Because other scalp conditions also cause itching, the best way to check for lice is to look for nits.

## How to get rid of head lice

Treating head lice requires two treatments, one week apart:

1. Get a head lice shampoo, cream rinse or lotion from your drug store. You don't need a prescription but can request one from your physician if you want to use your drug plan. Ask your pharmacist if you have any

questions. Head lice products do not prevent head lice. **Use only when lice or nits are present.**

2. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding and need treatment for lice, before choosing a product consult your physician or public health nurse. If you are treating other people, wear plastic or rubber gloves.
3. Consult your doctor before choosing a product for treatment of children under two years of age, if lice are discovered on eyebrows, eyelashes or beard or if the skin of the scalp is broken or infected.
4. When choosing a product, read the list of contents and the directions very carefully. Don't use a product if the person being treated is allergic to any of its ingredients. In Ontario the most common head lice products contain **pyrethrins, permethrin or lindane**:
  - **Pyrethrins (e.g. R&C shampoo)** should not be used for anyone with a known allergy to ragweed or chrysanthemums.
  - **Permethrin (e.g. NIX)** should not be used for persons with a known allergy to chrysanthemums, synthetic pyrethroids, or pyrethrins. Do not use on children under two years of age unless directed by a physician. The hair should be washed with a conditioner-free shampoo and a conditioner should **not** be used after washing. Itching may increase for a while after treatment but this is not a concern. Sometimes head lice resist one product. If this happens, try another followed by the second treatment one week later.
  - **Lindane (e.g. Kwellada)** should not be used for children under two years of age unless directed by a physician. For children age two to five, Lindane is recommended only on the advice of a nurse, pharmacist or physician.



COUNTY OF  
LAMBTON

## COMMUNITY HEALTH SERVICES DEPARTMENT

### Environmental Health & Prevention Services

160 Exmouth Street  
Point Edward, Ontario N7T 7Z6  
Telephone: 519 383-8331  
Toll free: 1-800-667-1839  
Fax: 519 383-7092  
[www.lambtonhealth.on.ca](http://www.lambtonhealth.on.ca)

#### 5. When using a head lice product:

- Timing is important. If the product is rinsed off too soon, lice and nits may not be killed. If left on too long, it causes unneeded exposure to the lice-killing chemicals.
- Wait at least 24 hours before rechecking head for live lice. Sometimes head lice resist one product. If live lice are found 24 hours after the first treatment, try another product followed by the second treatment as outlined in #6 below.
- Rinsing a child's hair under a tap (instead of a shower) will limit skin exposure and prevent the child from swallowing some product. These products should not be used near the eyes, nose or mouth. A towel held tightly over the eyes protects them during treatment.
- When treating another person, wear plastic or rubber gloves to avoid unnecessary exposure to the product.
- Store unused head lice products away from the reach of young children.

#### 6. Second Treatment:

Apply a second treatment in one week to kill any newly-hatched lice before they can lay eggs (only repeat treatment once). After the second treatment and removal of the nits, check the head twice a week for four weeks to make sure all lice and nits are gone.

#### To remove nits

- Bright, natural light helps you to see the nits better. Comb the hair to remove tangles, and then take hold of a lock of hair. Use your thumbnail against your first finger to strip the nits from the hair starting from the roots right down to the tips. Place the nits in a bag. Pin back that lock of hair and continue until all nits are removed. Try to remove the very tiny eggs laid right next to the scalp.
- You can also comb out the nits holding a fine tooth comb on a downward angle. This is easier if a conditioner is used after treatment (avoid conditioner if using NIX). Some plastic or metal fine-tooth combs work better than others.

#### Close Contacts

Follow up of close contacts is very important. Check the heads of all family members. Also tell others such as grandparents or baby sitters. All affected persons should be treated at the same time.

Tell the school, daycare centre, and sports or other children's groups so the parents can be told to check their children's heads. Also tell the parents of all playmates to prevent the spread and protect your child from being reinfested.

#### Cleaning personal items

Extra housecleaning and use of insecticide sprays are not needed. However, you will probably want to wash combs and brushes, headgear, pillow cases and towels in hot water. The heat of the water or the hot cycle of your clothes dryer will kill any live lice and nits.

#### Points to remember

- An untreated source among close contacts is a common reason for reoccurrence.
- Head lice do not live on dogs, cats or other animals, only on humans.
- Discourage children from sharing hats, scarves, combs, hair accessories and helmets.
- Keeping hair short **will not** prevent head lice.
- Check young school-aged children regularly for head lice, more often if there is an outbreak.
- **It is very important to remove all of the nits, even after the product is used as some may survive treatment.**