

What are head lice?

Head lice are blood-sucking insects that can live in the hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes. They can't reproduce without the warmth of the human head, nor can they survive without the blood provided by the scalp. They are about the size of a sesame seed, and while they can crawl very fast, they can't jump or fly. It is best to use a magnifying glass to see them well. Head lice should not be confused with body lice or crab lice. They are found only on humans and not on dogs, cats, or other pets.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

Head lice cause scalp irritation when they feed. Thus, the first sign of head lice is usually itching of the head and scalp, particularly at the back of the head and around the ears.

How are head lice spread?

Lice are spread through direct or indirect contact with infested objects or people. When combs or brushes are shared, lice can be transported from one head to another. This is also true for the sharing of hats and other personal items, or clothing that is used or worn on the head. As long as lice or their eggs are living, they can be moved from person to person and cause infestation.

How soon after exposure to lice would an infestation be noticed?

It might take two to three weeks to notice the itching associated with infestation, but nits can be seen before the itching begins. Nits look like white or dark ovals, and are most noticeable on the back of the neck and around the ears at the very base of the hair shaft (close to the scalp).

What is the treatment for head lice?

1. There are products called "pediculocides" which can be bought over the counter or with a prescription from a health care provider. Pediculocides contain chemicals that kill lice. These products should be used carefully after reading the directions thoroughly. It is important to remember that **NO PEDICULOCIDE TREATMENT IS 100% EFFECTIVE.**
2. It is important to remove all lice and nits by hand. You can do this using a lice comb— a comb with very fine teeth. You can also use your fingernails, a pet "flea comb", or baby safety scissors to remove nits and adult lice.
3. Check all household members at the same time, so that everyone needing it can be treated **AT THE SAME TIME.**
4. The home environment, such as bedding, clothing, etc., must also be treated at the same time.

How can head lice infestation be prevented?

- Teach children not to share clothing, hats, brushes, or combs with other children.
- Make head checks part of routine hygiene. Check children's heads once a week to find lice early. The earlier lice are found, the easier they are to treat.
- Teach children to hang coats and other personal belongings so that they don't touch the coats or personal belongings of other students.
- Work with schools as necessary to eliminate head lice.

Contact the local county health department or school personnel for specific information regarding head lice. Additional information sheets, treatment steps, and "Public Health Recommendations for the Prevention and Control of Head Lice Infestation in Schools and Child Care Settings" can be found on the Oklahoma State Department of Health Web site at: <http://www.health.state.ok.us/program/cdd/lice/index.html>.

