

## Checking Your Child for Head Lice

Head lice are a common problem in school-aged children. Anyone can get head lice however head lice are most common in ages 3-12. Statistics show that head lice are found in 3-5 % of the elementary population at any given time. Just like schools are not likely to be free of the common cold, no elementary school should be considered lice-free.

Here are some facts about head lice:

- Head lice are a benign condition. Lice do not carry disease, or cause illness. Although it causes much angst and stress for parents, it is not considered a significant medical condition.
- Lice are **not** easy to get, lice are spread primarily by head to head contact. They are much harder to get than a cold, flu, conjunctivitis, strep throat or impetigo.
- Head lice are spread primarily by direct head to head contact with the hair of other people who have head lice. Close contacts such as caregivers, members of the same household, overnight guests, and playmates that spend a lot of time together should be checked if you discover your child has head lice.
- Lice do not jump or fly, they only crawl.
- Lice can only survive on human heads (and they cannot live on pets). Lice cannot live off the human head for more than 24-48 hours. Lice cannot live in cars, homes, schools, clothing or linens. If a louse is found off the human head- it is a dying louse and not capable of reproducing.
- Personal hygiene or cleanliness of the home have nothing to do with getting head lice.
- Live lice rarely live greater than 24 hours off the human head. If you find that your child has lice, the best places for focusing efforts are nit removal from the affected heads and during an active case, minimize the head to head contact that normally occurs in families...hugging, cuddling, sleeping close together, and playmate sleepovers.

## How to Check Your Child for Head Lice

Typically children with lice have had it for about a month before it is discovered. Below you will find a simple way to screen your child for lice. Head lice are small and difficult to see. Because head lice are so small and hide from the light, they are difficult to detect. You are more likely to see their eggs (called nits). Nits are about the size of the eye of a needle, gray opaque, and tear shaped. They are cemented to the hair shaft about ¼ to 1/8 inch from the scalp. Unlike dandruff, (which is irregularly shaped), nits are symmetrical and do not come off the hair by simply blowing or shaking the hair. They must be pulled off the hair shaft to break the superglue-like substance of which they are attached. Once detached they are no longer viable.

**Visually looking at the hair dry is not always a reliable way to determine if a person has a case of head lice.** Below is a simple and proactive way to check your child for head lice. If you screen regularly, you will be more likely to discover lice in the early stages, which will be easier to treat. Keeping a good quality metal nit comb on hand will be key in the prevention/detection and management of head lice.

### Step 1

Comb any type of white hair conditioner on to dry brushed, detangled hair. This stuns the lice and makes it difficult for them to grip the hair or crawl around.

**Step 2**

Now comb small sections of the hair with a fine tooth, head lice comb. (The Nit-free Terminator™ is the best comb because of the spacing of the tines of the teeth and the ridges on the tines.)

**Step 3**

Repeat the combing for every section of the hair at least 4-5 times before going to the next section.

**Step 4**

Wipe the conditioner from the comb onto a white paper towel or tissue after each combing.

**Step 5**

Look at the tissue and on the comb for lice and eggs. Eggs look like dark sesame seeds sized spots against the white paper towel.

**Treatment for Head Lice**

Only treat a person for head lice if you find live lice in the hair. There are basically 3 approaches to treatment. Over the counter lice shampoos such as Nix or Rid, prescription medication from your doctor, or some people choose to use a holistic approach such as olive oil treatments and nit combing with conditioner. Below are some links for treatment approaches from the CDC and American Academy of Pediatrics. Be sure to only treat an active case of lice, and always follow the product directions. Do not over treat with lice shampoos, and do not use sprays in your home as they can be dangerous to people and pets.

If you discover your child has lice, first take a deep breath...and try to relax. Head lice are not harmful, are not dangerous, they are simply a nuisance. If you have questions about identification or treatment of head lice please do not hesitate to call your school nurse. Any reported cases of head lice will be handled in a confidential manner. Our goal is to provide support and education, and help dispel the many myths that are associated with head lice.

Resources:

<http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/schools.html>

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2010/07/26/peds.2010-1308.full.pdf>

<https://identify.us.com/idmybug/head-lice/head-lice-FAQS/index.html>

<http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dph/cdc/factsheets/head-lice.pdf>