

# Head Lice

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## What are head lice?

The head louse, or *Pediculus humanus capitis*, is a parasitic insect that can be found on the head, eyebrows, and eyelashes of people. Head lice feed on human blood several times a day and live close to the human scalp. Head lice are not known to spread disease.

Head lice come in three forms: 1) nits are lice eggs laid at the base of the hair shaft nearest the scalp; 2) nymphs are immature lice that hatch from the nits; 3) adults are fully grown and are about the size of a sesame seed.

## How is head lice spread?

Head lice move by crawling; they cannot hop or fly. Head lice are spread by direct contact with the hair of an infested person. Anyone who comes in head-to-head contact with someone who already has head lice is at risk. Although uncommon, head lice can be spread by contact with clothing or other personal items. Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with getting head lice.

## How common is head lice?

Head lice are found worldwide. In the United States, infestation with head lice is most common among preschool children attending child care, elementary schoolchildren, and the household members of infested children. It is estimated that 6 million to 12 million infestations occur each year in the United States among children ages 3-11.

## What are the symptoms of head lice?

The main symptom of head lice is an itchy scalp, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites. This may be worse behind the ears or on the back of the neck of an infected person. A person can be infected with head lice for up to three months before any itchiness is noticed, in fact there may be no itching at all. If the infected person scratches their scalp a lot, the skin may become broken and then infections can develop. Other potential signs of head lice infestation include nits stuck to the hairs as they grow out and pillows being dirtier due to louse droppings. Some people may have a tickling feeling of something moving in the hair or difficulty sleeping due to head lice activity at night.

## How is a head lice infestation diagnosed?

Head lice infestation is diagnosed by finding a live nymph or adult louse on the scalp or hair of a person. Because they are very small, move quickly, and avoid light, they can be difficult to find. Use of a magnifying glass and a fine-toothed comb may be helpful. The presence of nits does not always mean that a person has an active infestation.

A diagnosis of head lice should be made by a health care provider, school nurse, or other person trained to identify live head lice.

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### Calhoun County Public Health Department

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## What is the treatment for head lice?

Once a diagnosis of head lice is made there are either over-the-counter medications or prescription medications available. All household members and other close contacts of the infected person should be checked as well. All who are infected should be treated at the same time.

- Over-the-counter medications are available without a prescription at a local drug store or pharmacy. Each over-the-counter product approved for the treatment of head lice contains one of the following active ingredients: pyrethrins or permethrin.
- The two medications are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of head lice and are available only by prescription: malathion lotion 0.5% and benzyl alcohol lotion 5%.

Do not use extra amounts of any lice medication unless instructed to do so by your physician and pharmacist. The drugs used to treat lice are insecticides and can be dangerous if they are misused or overused.

Do not treat an infested person more than 2-3 times with the same medication if it does not seem to be working. This may be caused by using the medicine incorrectly or by resistance to the medicine. Always seek the advice of your health care provider if this should happen. He/she may recommend an alternative medication.

Do not use different head lice drugs at the same time unless instructed to do so by your physician and pharmacist.

An alternate natural option: Put olive oil (even cheap dollar store oil will work) all over hair and wear under a shower cap overnight. Comb it in the morning to remove nits and lice and then wash. Repeat every three days for a couple weeks to ensure that all nits and lice have been removed.

## How can head lice be prevented?

Avoid head-to-head contact during play and other activities at home, school, and elsewhere. Lice are spread most commonly by direct hair-to-hair contact and much less frequently by sharing clothing or belongings onto which lice or nits may have crawled or fallen.

## How do I get more information on head lice?

Calhoun County Public Health Department  
Phone: (269) 969-6383

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
Phone: 800-CDC-INFO

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

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This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

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