

# Let's Talk ABOUT...

## Head lice

**H**ead lice are tiny insects that can live in human hair. One lice insect is called a "louse." Their color ranges from light beige to black. They have six legs and are about the size of a sesame seed. Lice live in hairy areas of the body and feed by biting and sucking blood. This may cause itching. Itching is the most common symptom. The eggs (called nits) are small, silvery and oval. Nits are laid on the hairs near the scalp, especially the hairline area at the back of the neck, and behind the ears. Lice hatch within seven to ten days. The nits are much easier to find than the lice. Only nits within a quarter inch of the scalp are considered live and active. Dandruff, lint, and hair spray globules can be mistaken for nits, but these can easily be brushed from hair. Nits are difficult to remove, and cannot be brushed away.

It is common for children to come home from school or day care with head lice. It can then spread to the whole family, either by direct contact with the child's head or contact with clothing or other accessories that person uses (like a brush or hair band). The louse crawls slowly, up to 12 inches per minute. It does not jump, hop, or fly. We cannot catch head lice from or give lice to pets. The head louse only affects humans.

### How do I treat head lice?

Several products are available to treat head lice. These are either shampoos or cream rinses. Some can be purchased over the counter while others need a prescription. Ask your doctor or public health clinic what you should use .

Do not use these shampoos and rinses on infants because the medicine is absorbed through infant's skin and can affect the brain. For little children, lice and nits may be hand-picked or taken out with a

nit-comb (found in pharmacies). You only need to remove the nits closest to the scalp.

When you use a lice treatment shampoo or rinse, follow the instructions on the shampoo/rinse bottle exactly. More is not better. Too much can irritate skin and be absorbed through the skin into the bloodstream, causing unwanted side effects. Use the medicine only on the hair and scalp. If you use the shampoo on your child's hair during a bath, rinse your child's body quickly. Protect your child's eyes and wear rubber gloves when applying the shampoo. After the first treatment, comb or pick out all the nits. The nit comb works best on slightly damp hair. One treatment is usually enough to kill the lice but not the nits. Often a second treatment is needed 7–10 days later.

### What about our home?

Lice can live for 24 hours in clothing or articles that have touched hair. Nits and immature lice can even live longer. Common articles that might contain lice include bed linens, coats, hats, upholstered furniture, combs, and brushes. In order to keep the lice from coming back, it is important to do the following:

- **Other family members:** If crawling lice or nits are found on a family member, they should also be treated with the lice shampoo. Then the rest of the household should be examined every two to three days for crawling lice or nits.
- **Clothing and bed linen:** Wash in a normal washing machine; use hot water. This should kill the lice and eggs. Items that cannot be washed may be dry cleaned or placed in a hot dryer for 20 minutes.
- **Furniture and carpet:** Vacuum your upholstered furniture and carpet. Spraying

is not recommended because the vapors are too poisonous for humans and animals.

- **Combs, brushes, and hair accessories:**  
Soak in lice-killing products for one hour or put in boiling water for 10 minutes.

#### **Other items:**

Items that cannot be washed or vacuumed, such as stuffed animals, can be placed in a tightly closed plastic bag for two weeks. If the lice and eggs do not have human contact they cannot live longer than this. At the end of 14 days, the item can be removed without any risk of getting head lice.

#### **How do I prevent head lice?**

Teach your children not to share combs, brushes, hats, and coats. Check your child's hair if she itches or complains about itching. Use a blow dryer on your child's hair. Get rid of lice as soon as they are found. This can prevent them from spreading in your home. Everyone who comes in contact with a child with head lice needs to be checked, but they should only be treated if they are infested. If head lice continue to be a problem in your home, call your doctor.

#### **Who do I call?**

If you have more questions or you cannot get rid of lice, call your doctor or medical advisor, the school nurse, the local public health department, or the Primary Children's Infection Control nurse at 801.662.6311.

For more information:

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