

Facts of Lice



What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny bugs that live only on the scalp of human beings. They are the size of a pinhead. They do not have wings so they cannot fly or jump, and they are not found on cats, dogs, or any other household pet. The bites from head lice cause itching and scratching. Scratching may cause sores which can get infected.

Lice lay eggs on the hair. These eggs are also called nits. Live eggs are dark. They can also be the colour of the hair they are on. Nits are half the size of a pinhead. They stick to the hair and do not fall off if you touch them. After the eggs have hatched, the shells are white. These empty shells stay on the hair, as the hair grows.



How are lice spread?

Anyone can get head lice. School children get lice more often than adults. When children play, their heads often touch. Lice crawl from head to head. Head lice are spread by direct head to head contact only.

How do I check for lice?

Use a bright light. Use a magnifying glass if you have one. Spread the hair with a comb and look at the scalp. Lice crawl very fast, but they do not fly or jump.

Look for eggs on the hair close to the scalp. Lice like to live in warm spots. They are often found on the hair behind the ears or where the hair meets the neck. Look for open sores and scabs on the head. Check all the people that live in your house.



What if someone in my family has head lice?

If you find lice, tell close contacts such as family members, friends and classmates so they can be checked for lice. Everyone in the house with lice will need to be treated at the same time.

How do I treat head lice?

Many head lice products are available. Talk to a health professional about the best product to use. Read all instructions carefully and follow them step by step so that the product will work. Some products say that only one treatment is needed. But, no lice product kills all of the eggs, so a second treatment 7 to 10 days after the first treatment is needed. This will kill the newly hatched lice. Do not use conditioners, gels, hairspray, oils or mousse for the duration of the treatment. Use only plain shampoo. Do not use homemade remedies. There is no evidence that they work.



Call your doctor or pharmacist before you use any product if...

- anyone has allergies to chrysanthemums, ragweed, synthetic pyrethroids, etc.
- anyone has a seizure disorder
- you are pregnant or breastfeeding and you need treatment or you need to treat other people
- your child is under 2 years old
- you find lice on eyebrows, eyelashes or beard
- the skin of the scalp is broken or infected
- head lice continue to re-occur

How do I get rid of all the eggs?

Removing eggs after the treatment makes it easier to see new lice.

- Sit under a bright light.
- Let your child read, watch television or a video to keep busy.
- Comb the hair to get rid of tangles. Hold a small lock of hair and comb the other hair out of the way. Pin long hair away from the piece you are working with.
- Slide each egg off the hair using your thumbnail and fingernail. Put the eggs in a bag to throw away when you are done. After taking all the eggs off a lock of hair, move to the next section. Pin back long hair or make small ponytails to keep the clean hair away from the hair you have not done yet. Keep sliding eggs off until you remove all the eggs.
- Check the hair 2 times a week for 4 weeks to make sure all the eggs are gone.



Do I need to wash or clean anything else?

Some parents may wish to wash combs, brushes, pillow cases and towels in hot water and dry in a dryer for 20 minutes to kill lice and eggs. These objects do not play a major role in the spread of head lice.

Who do I contact if I have questions?

City of Hamilton Public Health Services – 905-546-CITY (2489)
or visit - www.hamilton.ca (Search – head lice)



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Public Health Services

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