

## Head Lice



OK. Let's just say up front that **HEAD LICE ARE ICKY!!** However, they are not scary, and they should not be approached as if they are going to destroy the neighborhood.

In fact, it is important to know that they are **not dangerous**. They are not known to spread any kind of disease, and the only symptom they seem to cause is itching. So, first, take a deep breath. And let's talk about the facts.

Head lice are small parasitic insects, technically *Pediculus humanus capitis*. They tend to infect the scalp, eyebrows, and eyelashes. They feed on blood and, to survive, they require close skin proximity for warmth. They do not jump and they do not fly. They lay eggs, called **nits**, which are firmly attached to hair shafts. Nits hatch into live lice (nymph stage) in about 1 week, and are capable of laying more eggs about 1 week after that. Adult lice can lay up to 8 nits in a day and live on the scalp for up to 30 days. Off the scalp, they survive no more than 24-48 hours. Nits can survive off the scalp for up to two weeks, but rarely go on to then cause infections.

Diagnosing an active infection is best done by seeing live lice in the hair. However, this can be difficult and time consuming as the lice are small, move quickly, and are often few in number.

Often, the diagnosis is made based on the presence of nits in the hair. Keep in mind, though, that **nits more than 1/4 inch from the scalp are almost always already hatched or dead** and may not indicate an active infection that requires treatment. Also, nits are sometimes confused with dandruff and other particles commonly found in the scalp. True nits should be firmly attached to the hair shafts.



## Treatment

We usually recommend initial treatment with **1% permethrin lotion** (brand name **Nix**), which can be safely used above the age of 2 months. This treatment seems to be more effective and causes fewer adverse reactions than some other choices.

- Wash the hair first with regular shampoo. Do not use hair conditioner. It will interfere with the action of the medication.

- Apply the full 2 ounce bottle to damp hair. Two bottles may be necessary for people with very long or very thick hair.
- Work the lotion into the scalp down to the roots.
- Leave the treatment in place for **10 minutes** before rinsing with water and towel drying.
- Do not wash the hair for 48 hours, allowing the medicine to take full effect. Avoid conditioner for 2 weeks after treatment.
- Carefully comb out the hair every 2-3 days over the next three weeks using a fine toothed lice comb. Remove nits and dead lice, and inspect for evidence of ongoing infestation. This will likely be time consuming but must be done carefully to be effective.
- If **live lice** are still seen after 48 hours, please contact the office before repeating the treatment. It may be necessary to use a different product.

Some nits may survive the initial treatment. Therefore, most authorities recommend a **second treatment with Nix after 9 days** to kill any lice which have since hatched, although a more aggressive regimen on days 7 and 14 may also be considered.

These guidelines will effectively treat most infestations. However, other treatments may be used for resistant cases. Please contact the office for further guidance.

## **Additional Measures**

Lice that are off the body rarely cause further infection and cannot live more than 24-48 hours. It is not necessary to fumigate the entire household or spend large amounts of time and money on cleaning. (And don't worry about the dog or cat. Lice are species specific. You will not get human lice from your pet.)

- Examine** other household members and close contacts for signs of infection. Treat if appropriate. Some authorities will recommend a single simultaneous treatment of household contacts under some circumstances, even in absence of such signs, to reduce chances of reinfection.
- Wash** all clothing, linens, and similar items the patient has used in the past 2 days with hot water and a high heat dryer cycle. Items that cannot be washed should be sealed in a plastic bag for 2 weeks.
- Soak** combs and brushes in hot water for 10 minutes.
- Vacuum** rugs and furniture.
- Teach** children not to share combs, brushes, hats, and scarves to reduce the chances of future infections.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Association of School Nurses oppose "no-nit" policies for school return and believe that children should return to school as soon as possible after treatment with appropriate medicine.