

FACTS ABOUT LICE

What are lice?

Lice are reddish-brown insects about the size of a sesame seed. They live and lay their eggs (nits) on hair close to the scalp. Lice do not carry disease and they do not live on pets or other animals. A single insect is called a "louse".

There are three stages in the lifespan of a louse including the nit (egg), nymph (young adult), and adult stage. The life cycle of a louse is 25 to 30 days; it takes about ten days for a newborn louse to become an adult. One adult female louse can lay 6 to 8 nits a day for up to 10 days.

What are the symptoms of lice?

Symptoms of lice include itching, sores from scratching the head, a sense of something moving in the hair, and irritability. Scratching can lead to skin sores on the scalp and skin infections. In some cases, there are no symptoms.

How are lice spread?

Lice can crawl from one person to another. They do not fly or jump from one person to another. Most often, lice are spread by head-to-head contact with a person who has lice. They are also spread when a person with lice shares items like coats, hats, helmets, pillow, brushes, and other personal items with another person, or when these personal items come in direct contact during storage.

Who is at risk for lice?

Anyone in contact with an infested individual, or contaminated items, can get lice. It is not associated with economic status or personal hygiene. It is more common in preschool children and their families because of close contact. Girls often tend to get lice more often than boys.

How are lice diagnosed?

By carefully inspecting hair with a bright light and a magnifying glass, lice and nits can be identified. Nits can be a variety of colors including clear, white, yellowish, brown, or gray and are oval in shape. They are usually close to the scalp around the ears and along the nape of the neck. They feel like little grains of sand on the hair.

What is the treatment for lice?

There are a variety of treatments for lice. In all cases, it is important to comb the hair *daily* for 2-3 weeks with special nit combs to remove lice and nits. Pesticides are available for purchase over-the-counter and by prescription. They should only be used after talking with a health care provider. Pesticides are not recommended for pregnant or nursing mothers or children under two years of age.

The focus of lice treatment should be on removing the lice and nits from the scalp. Household or environmental cleaning should be secondary.

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Household cleaning for lice includes the following:

1. Wash sheets, pillowcases, towels, and clothing in hot (130 degree) water and dry for 30 minutes on a high setting.
2. Items that cannot be washed can be:
 - run in the dryer on the “hot” setting for 30 minutes,
 - sealed in a plastic bag for two weeks, or
 - dry-cleaned.
3. Soak brushes, combs, and hair ornaments in a bleach solution for one hour. To make the solution, mix 1/4 cup bleach with one quart of cold water.
4. Vacuum the floor, furniture, and car seat. Throw the vacuum bag away or empty the vacuum canister in an outside garbage container after vacuuming.

How is the spread of lice reduced?

1. Regularly inspect the hair of children in group settings.
2. Avoid close personal contact with individuals who have lice.
3. Do not share hats, combs, coats, pillows, or other personal items.
4. Keep long hair pulled back.
5. Provide separate storage areas for each person’s clothing and other personal items using individual cubbies, lockers, or bins with solid walls.
6. Assign sleeping mats and bedding to only one child and store these separately when children are in group care. Children should sleep 36” apart or in a head-to-foot arrangement.
7. When doing head checks, wash hands after checking each child.

Exclude from group setting?

Exclude until live lice and nits are eliminated. This usually means excluding until effective treatment has been provided.

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