

FACT SHEET

LICE - Head Lice (Pediculosis)

Pennsylvania Chapter
American Academy of Pediatrics



What are lice?

Lice are very small, tan colored insects (less than 1/8 in.) that live on blood they draw from the scalp and lay their eggs on the hair shafts close to the scalp. The eggs (nits) are tiny, about the size of the eye of a small needle and gray or white in color.

Symptoms include itching of the skin where the lice are feeding on the scalp or neck. Sometimes crawling lice may be seen in the hair. More often the observer sees eggs (nits) glued to the hair, often at the back of the neck and around the ears. The child may have scratch marks on the scalp or back of the neck at the hairline.

Head lice infestation in children attending child care is common and not a sign of poor hygiene. Head lice have not been found to be responsible for spreading any disease.

How are lice spread?

Head lice are spread through direct contact with an infested person or indirectly by storing together or sharing personal items such as combs, brushes, hats, scarves, jackets, blankets, sheets, pillowcases, etc. Lice crawl. They do not hop or fly.

How long is someone with lice contagious?

Head lice survive only by feeding on human blood. They only lay eggs while on the head and generally don't survive more than 7 days away from the scalp. As long as children are untreated or have live nits on their hair, they are contagious. No lice treatment is 100% effective other than mechanical removal of all the lice and nits. Most of the nits that are 1/4 inch or more away from the scalp do not contain live lice.

What can parents and child care providers do?

- Consult a health provider for a treatment plan.
- Provide individual lockers or assigned coat hooks for each child, spaced far enough apart so garments are not touching.
- Encourage children not to share hats, headgear, hair care items, towels, bedding and clothing.
- Disinfect all combs, brushes and similar items by soaking in hot (130-140 degree) water for 10 minutes.
- Thoroughly vacuum carpets, mattresses, furniture and floors.