

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET



Department of Health & Human Services

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Head Lice

What are Head Lice?

Head lice are tiny insects 1/8" long that live on the human head. Color varies from light to dark tan. They do not jump or fly, but crawl from hair to hair and feed on blood from scalp bites.

Who Can Get Head Lice?

Anyone can. Head lice is most common in preschool and elementary school age children.

What are the Signs & Symptoms?

- An itchy head, especially around the ears and back of the neck
- Lice eggs are smaller than sesame seeds and are called "nits." Unlike dandruff and other matter, nits are glued to the hair shaft, often close to the scalp. Nits can vary in color including white, gray, tan or brown
- Nits can be found on any hair and hatch in 7-10 days
- Adult lice may or may not be seen

How Do You Get Head Lice?

Head lice can be passed from one person to another in a number of ways:

- Head to head contact is the most common way
- Sharing items like combs, brushes, towels, bedding, hats, coats, scarfs, ribbons and barrettes
- Placing heads on furniture, rugs, or car seats recently used by someone with lice
- Coats, hats, scarves touching each other in piles, on hooks or hangers

How Long is the Person Contagious?

Until lice and nits are destroyed

Are There Complications?

Skin infections may occur from scratching. Head lice do not spread illness or disease.

Is There a Treatment for Head Lice?

Yes, there are several prescription and over-the-counter head lice products available through your healthcare provider or drugstore. Oakland County Health Division does not endorse any specific brand or product. These products must not be used before head lice are present.

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Treatment Steps

- If using a product to loosen nits (e.g., *Clear, Step 2* or vinegar), it must be used first, before applying a treatment to kill lice
- Wash hair with a cleansing shampoo that does not have conditioners, fruit, vegetables or protein added
- Towel dry until a piece of toilet paper does not stick to the hair
- Apply lice treatment according to package directions (do not use in shower or bathtub)
- Set timer or alarm clock for the full amount of time
- Rinse out lice product (do not shampoo hair)
- Do not apply conditioners, gels, hair sprays or other hair products
- Towel dry with a clean towel (not the one used before treatment)
- Remove all nits using nit comb, fingernails or by pulling out strands of hair. Put removed nits directly in a trash container
- For most treatment products, a second treatment is required in 10 days to kill newly hatched lice. Read product directions
- Check each family member's head daily for 14 days, and re-treat if lice or nits are found (Include all households where infested person has slept in the previous 2 days)
- Call all people who have recently been in contact with the infested person: school, babysitter, latchkey, friends, relatives or any place they have stayed
- Teach your child not to share hats, combs, hair ornaments, headphones or helmets

Cleaning Steps

- Remove hair and then soak combs and brushes in steaming hot water for 4-5 minutes
- Wash and dry all bedding (sheets, pillow cases, blankets, mattress covers, and bedspreads) at hot settings. **Allow water to get hot between loads of laundry**
- Put pillows and non-washable bedding in hot dryer for twenty (20) minutes or seal in plastic bag for two (2) weeks. Put stuffed animals and dolls in a sealed plastic bag for two (2) weeks
- Vacuum all mattresses before making the bed with clean linens
- Vacuum all upholstered furniture, carpeting, throw pillows, seats in cars, and car seats. After use, place vacuum bag in garbage bag and tie tightly. **Use a new vacuum bag for each cleaning**
- Wash all jackets, sweaters, hats and other clothes that have come in contact with the infested person.
- Fold clean clothes and put them away
- Take non-washable clothes to the cleaners, put in a hot dryer for twenty (20) minutes or seal in a plastic bag for two (2) weeks

**For more information on Head Lice, call (248) 858-1406
or toll free 1 (800) 848-5533.**

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