

A Nit's Guide to Lice

Firstly Don't Panic!!

I really think the entire issue of head lice is intended to keep parents humble. There is no greater equalizer than head lice—they strike the nicest, cleanest families as well as all the others. Head lice are no indication of educational or economic status or of your house-cleaning prowess. Head lice are just one of those things that happen when they happen!

This is not a serious medical problem, but lice are annoying and very contagious.

Does your son have ... **an itchy scalp, something moving in the hair or sores from scratching**? He might indeed have the scourge of the schools, better known as head lice (*Pediculus humanus capitis*).

Head **lice** are 2-4 mm long and look a bit like a grain of rice with six legs.

These little suckers are see-through but turn reddish brown when engorged with blood after feasting on scalp blood. They will starve to death after 1 – 2 days without blood but with a great scalp, they can live for about a month. This does mean that they can survive on other objects for 1-2 days before they starve.

The hallmark symptom of head lice is itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the faeces and saliva, but a person may have lice for months before the itching begins. For me, just thinking about lice makes my head itch.

When hunting these critters down, use a bright light or full sun and look behind the ears and at the back of the neck first but remember that the entire head must be inspected. A magnifying glass may make the job easier.

Lice eggs are called **nits**. Even one nit in the hair should be treated. The egg might be empty, or contain a dead larva but -- then again, it might not! You will find these nits, shiny, small, greyish-white oval-shaped eggs cemented to the hair shaft, near the scalp as they need the warmth to hatch, which will be 10 - 14 days after they are laid. Nits stick like mad, not to be confused with dandruff flakes which flee embarrassingly onto collars! The nits on the ends of the hairs are usually old and hatched and have grown out with the hair.

Now, a moment of silence to be grateful that lice can't fly...although they do jump!

Contrary to popular belief, contracting lice is not related to poor hygiene – in fact, head lice are thought to prefer clean hair to dirty hair. Lice spread from person to person when heads touch but are also commonly spread via, hats, headphones, combs, brushes, towels, clothing, car seats, sofa cushions, stuffed animals, and bedding.

What do you do if you find lice?

The goal of treatment is to **remove all lice and nits**.

Historically, the main method for [getting rid of lice](#) has been mechanical -- physically removing the nits, or "nit picking," such as apes do for each other during their daily grooming routine! It is best to acquire a special fine-toothed comb for this.

➤ You can try a "combing only" technique.

Wash the hair with an ordinary shampoo and conditioner and leave wet. White vinegar (useful but not essential) can also be applied to the hair to break down the cement holding the nit to the hair shaft. The aborigines use tea tree oil to get the nits to loosen their hold! With a fine-toothed comb, stroke slowly outward from the roots through one lock of hair at a time.

Lice will land on the back of the comb, get caught between the teeth, or fall off. Space at least 30 strokes over the head.

Repeat every three days. Because new-born lice do not lay eggs for the first week, all lice should disappear after about two weeks of combing. This method is fine but will not help us eliminate lice from the school.

➤ **You can also kill the adult lice and nits with an insecticidal shampoo.**

Remember, most lice-killing products are pesticides. **Lysol** however is a brilliant, non-toxic environmentally safe product which is a silicone base that smothers the lice and loosens the nits. It is safe enough for babies and contains no toxic pesticide. This is first prize.

The pesticides are in some cases as dangerous for the child as they are for the lice! Of all the pesticides **Lyclear** is the safest, most effective, and most pleasant to use, and is available over the counter. This works for lice and nits. Please follow the application directions very carefully. **Do not apply this in the bath** as the chemical can be absorbed through the skin and do not get the shampoo on or near the eyes. You will still need to comb out the dead nits though because you will need to be able to see if your son gets infected again as is often the case. **One shampooing** is usually sufficient and will kill and protect against reinfection for 14 days. Consult your pharmacist or physician before applying or using lice treatment pesticides when the person involved is pregnant, nursing, has allergies, asthma, epilepsy, pre-existing medical conditions, or has lice or nits in the eyebrows or eyelashes.

Gambex works only for the lice and does not kill the nits but is a remarkably toxic drug and I do not recommend using this at all.

Please do not become overly neurotic and do not treat with chemicals just in case your child has head lice. Don't stop with just treating everybody's hair! You also have to make sure to **wash or bag anything that could possibly have come in contact with your children's heads.**

Wash - Reinfestation is common, so I recommend washing in hot water all bedding, hats, and anything else that might have been exposed and dry them in a hot dryer if possible without destroying the item! This is hard work, but the more you do the better your chances of killing the little suckers the first time around. Brushes and combs can be disinfected by soaking them in hot, soapy water for 10 minutes.

Bag - If you completely seal such items (think stuffed animals or pillows) in bags, the lice will die off after a few days as they need a human host to survive and the nits will hatch in about a week and die of starvation. The current recommendation is to bag for 14 days.

Vacuuming is the safest and best way to remove lice or fallen hairs with attached nits from upholstered furniture, rugs, stuffed animals and car seats. Avoid lice sprays!

Check every member of the family.

To help prevent lice, discourage your son from sharing hats, headphones, hooded coats, scarves, combs, brushes, towels and pillows.

If you discover lice on your child, notify the school and kindly keep your child at home until there are no longer any live lice on the head and after your ordeal is over, pat yourself on the back for surviving yet another rite of passage as the parents of school-age children. And if you get over your embarrassment enough to talk about your experience with friends, you'll discover just how common lice are.

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