

Head Lice



Toronto Public Health

What are Head Lice?

- Insects that live and breed on your head
- They feed by biting your scalp
- They are a nuisance - not a health hazard
- 6-12 million people worldwide get head lice each year

Toronto Public Health

Who can get Head Lice?

- Anyone who comes in close head-to-head contact with someone who has head lice
- Head lice are found more often among children ages 3-10 years and their families



Toronto Public Health

Signs of Head Lice



- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites
- Irritability
- Sores on the head caused by scratching (These can sometimes become infected)



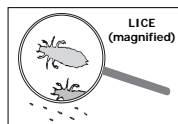
How do you get Head Lice?

- Close contact with someone who has head lice (heads touching during play/sports)
 - **head lice do not fly or jump but crawl really quickly**
- Sharing of hats, scarves, combs, hair ribbons, pillows, brushes, towels and helmets

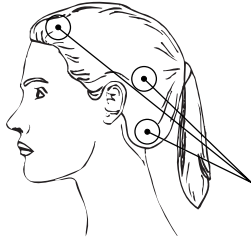


What do they look like?

- Tiny, wingless insects that move quickly and are difficult to see
- 1-2 mm long and grayish brown in color
- Nits (eggs) can sometimes be mistaken for dandruff



Common sites where Head Lice are found



Commonly found around ears, forehead and nape of neck. Lie close to scalp.

Toronto Public Health

Life cycle of Head Lice

Life Cycle consists of three stages:

Nits (eggs)

- oval, usually white in color, may be mistaken for dandruff, are firmly attached to a hair shaft, close to the scalp
- take about 1 week to hatch into nymphs

Nymph (baby louse)

- lives on scalp and feeds off human blood
- matures in 1 week into an adult louse
- if a nymph falls off a person it usually survives only one day

Toronto Public Health

Life cycle of Head Lice (continued)

Adult Louse

- size of a sesame seed, has 6 legs, and is tan to grayish-white
- females lay nits - they are usually larger than males
- can live up to 30 days on a person's head
- feeds on human blood
- if a louse falls off a person, it may survive one to two days

Toronto Public Health

Head Lice treatments



- Talk to your doctor:
 - if you are pregnant or breastfeeding
 - before treating children under the age of two
 - if a person has a seizure disorder
 - if the skin of the scalp has an infection

Treatments (continued)



- There are many products available at your pharmacy (talk to your pharmacist)
 - Buy a head lice shampoo or cream rinse from your drug store.
 - Apply as instructed. Misuse and overuse could be hazardous.
 - The products kill the head lice and many eggs, but a **second treatment is needed 7 to 10 days after the first treatment to kill any newly hatched lice before they mature.**
- **Remove all nits by using fingernails or a nit comb**

Treatments (continued)



- It is suggested that you limit shampoo use between the two treatments and in the week following the second treatment. This may allow the head lice product to work more effectively.
- Check head for live lice daily between treatments and remove any nits that are still present (do this in bright light)
 - head lice and nits are commonly found around ears, forehead and nape of neck - check these areas carefully
 - if live lice are found in the days following the first treatment, consult your pharmacist or (416) 338-7600
- Check all close contacts (i.e. family and friends)

Treatments (continued)



- **There is conflicting information concerning whether or not all nits should be removed after the application of head lice products**
- **Toronto Public Health recommends the removal of all nits as:**
 - head lice products are not 100% effective
 - removal of nits may minimize the hatching of eggs that were not killed and the spread of young hatched lice to other heads
 - it is easier to notice a new infestation if all nits are removed

Toronto Public Health

Treatments (continued)



If a baby or a woman who is pregnant or breastfeeding has head lice:

- Call your family doctor or Motherisk Program of the Hospital for Sick Children at 416-813-6780 for advice before choosing a head lice treatment product
- If pregnant and treating others, wear plastic or rubber gloves

Toronto Public Health

Alternative treatments

- **At this point in time Toronto Public Health does not recommend the use of alternative treatments (vinegar, petroleum jelly, mineral oil, baby oil, cooking oil, tea tree oil or other alternatives)**
- **This is because their effectiveness has not been scientifically documented**

Toronto Public Health

House cleaning?



- **You must wash in hot, soapy water:**
 - hats, scarves, hairbrushes, combs, hair ribbons, pillowcases, towels, bed linens, machine washable stuffed toys and coats
- **Wash items after the first and second treatment**
- Items that cannot be machine washed should be dry cleaned or placed in an airtight bag for 10 days to two weeks
- **Excessive house cleaning is not necessary, but vacuum surfaces where heads have rested** (i.e. sofas, seats of cars, sports helmets)
- **NEVER use insecticide sprays**

Toronto Public Health

Controlling the spread



- Discourage head-to-head contact and sharing of hats, scarves, hairbrushes, combs and hair ribbons
- Tie long hair back in braids
- Check heads of all family members and people in close contact

Toronto Public Health

Controlling the spread (continued)



- All family members with head lice should be treated at the same time
- Check young school age children weekly for head lice; more often if there is an outbreak

Toronto Public Health

Controlling the spread (continued)



- If you find lice or nits present on your child's head:
 - Tell all close contacts to check their head
 - **Tell the child's teacher and/or day care worker**

Toronto Public Health

Important things to remember



- Lack of cleanliness does not cause head lice
- Both children and adults can get it
- Short hair does not prevent the spread
- Lice do not live on cats, dogs or other animals
- You cannot prevent head lice by using head lice shampoos or products - use only if lice are present
- **Be sensitive to your child's feelings!**

Toronto Public Health

For more information...

■ **Please note that the information about head lice varies between sources**

■ Some recommended web sites include:

- Toronto Public Health http://www.toronto.ca/health/hl_index.htm
- University of British Columbia www.healthcare.ubc.ca/lice/intro.html
- Harvard School of Public Health www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html
- Canadian Paediatric Society <http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/whensick/HeadLice.htm>
- American Academy of Pediatrics <http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/pediatrics;110/3/638.pdf>

Updated July 2005

Toronto Public Health
