

PEDICULOSIS (HEAD LICE)

Fact Sheet

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny, wingless insects that live on the human scalp and feed on blood. They can live on a person's head for up to 30 days. Head lice crawl, they cannot jump or fly.

Head lice eggs, called nits, are very small and often mistaken for dandruff, but unlike dandruff, they do not brush off easily. Adult lice are greyish-brown, about the size of a sesame seed (2–3 mm). Head lice are most often found on the head, especially behind the ears and at the back of the neck, but they can also be found on eyebrows and eyelashes.

Head lice are not considered a public health issue because they do not spread disease. Having head lice is not related to cleanliness.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

Symptoms can take several weeks to appear after first getting head lice.

The most common symptom is itching of the scalp, caused by an allergic reaction to lice bites. Some people may have head lice and not feel itchy at all, especially during a first infestation. Other symptoms may include:

- Scratch marks or redness on the scalp and neck
- Sores caused by repeated scratching (these can sometimes become infected)
- A tickling or crawling feeling in the hair or on the scalp

How does head lice spread?

Anyone can get head lice. They spread mainly through direct head-to-head contact with someone who already has lice. This is common when children play or spend time close together.

Head lice can also spread by sharing items that touch the head, such as hats, helmets, scarves, combs, brushes, hair accessories, pillows, stuffed toys or towels, especially if these items were recently used by someone with lice.

Head lice do not live on pets, and pets cannot spread them. Since lice need human blood to survive, they usually die within 48 hours when not on a person.

PUBLIC HEALTH

1-877-464-9675

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york.ca/OutbreakManagement

How are head lice treated?

Talk to a pharmacist or health care provider to help choose the best treatment. Only people who have live lice need to be treated. All close contacts should be checked, but treatment is only needed for those with confirmed lice.

If someone in a household has head lice, others may have them too. Everyone in the household should be checked and treated at the same time, if needed, to prevent lice from spreading back and forth.

Most treatments need two applications. To kill newly hatched lice, complete the second treatment seven to 10 days after the first application. Carefully follow the product instructions. Some head lice treatments are free for Ontario residents aged 24 and under through the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP+), if not covered by private insurance.

THE HEAD CHECK

- Sit in a well-lit area, preferably near a window or bright light
- Divide the hair into small sections and check one section at a time
- Check for live lice and nits attached close to the scalp, especially behind the ears and at the back of the neck
- Check all family members, and make sure someone checks your head too
- If lice or nits are found, begin treatment as recommended
- If no lice or nits are found, keep checking twice a week for at least one month

How can head lice be prevented?

- Avoid head-to-head contact during play, sports, and social activities
- Do not share items that touch the head, such as hats, scarves, helmets, combs, brushes, towels or hair accessories
- Tie long hair back in braids or ponytails
- Regularly check hair

For child care operators – steps to take in your setting

- Use hot water (at least 54°C or 130°F) to clean washable items that were in contact with a child with head lice within the past 48 hours. Dry items on high heat for at least 15 minutes
 - Seal items that cannot be washed in an airtight plastic bag for two weeks
- Fumigating or fogging is not recommended - the chemicals can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin

If head lice are identified in a child in your care, follow your setting's procedures for management. Encourage them to seek guidance and treatment options from a health care provider. Children with head lice do not need to be excluded from child care. For more information, call York Region Health Connection at 1-800-361-5653 ext. 4, or dial 711 with a TTY device or email Health.Inspectors@york.ca to speak with a Public Health Inspector.