

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?

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

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

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, 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

TTY: Dial 711

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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 one person 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 require two applications, with the second treatment done seven to 10 days after the first, to kill newly hatched lice. Always follow the product instructions carefully.

Some head lice treatments are free for Ontario residents aged 24 and under through 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, or more often during an outbreak
- If someone is scratching their head or complains of itching, check their scalp

How can head lice be prevented?

Anyone can get head lice, and they are not a sign of poor hygiene. To help reduce the chance of spreading lice:

- 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, especially during school or childcare outbreaks

Routine house cleaning is enough—special sprays or insecticides are not needed.