

HEAD LICE INFO

What head lice are

Head lice are tiny insects that feed solely on the blood of people, and are most common on children of early elementary school age. Head lice grasp the head hair with their claws and insert their tiny

mouthparts into the skin for just a minute or so to drink a tiny droplet of blood. Lice cannot burrow into the skin and do not play a role in transmitting any disease-causing organisms. Thus, head lice are rarely anything more than a nuisance. These insect pests are most commonly shared by direct head-to-head contact. Activities such as hugging, play wrestling, and sharing a bed all offer opportunities for lice to spread between friends and family members. Regardless of the wealth of the community or family, the cleanliness of the home, or the month of the year, however, ---only about one in every 100 U.S. elementary school children will be infested with head lice, of those infested children, only a few will spread” lice to others.

How to manage and prevent head lice at school

Head lice infest people, not school buildings or buses. A louse that falls from the hair will very likely die within hours, and almost certainly die by the next day. Thus, applying insecticides in the school or bus to control or prevent head lice is unnecessary and wasteful. It may also be prohibited by law. If a child does have lice, only the child’s parent or guardian should or need be notified—ideally at the end of the day. The parent should be offered scientifically and medically sound information on how to manage the problem. Divulging the child’s medical condition to the teacher or principal, or to other students and their parents, would violate confidentiality. Head lice may be an annoyance, but they are neither a serious medical problem nor a public health issue. The school’s efforts regarding lice is to educate students, parents, and school personnel with up-to-date information. Unjustified actions include screening children for lice or nits, treating children at school, treating the school building, and excluding from school children who are infested or presumably infested.

Much ado about nits

Lice eggs seem to cause more panic among parents and school staff than does nearly any other problem associated with head lice. Dead eggs and the remnants of hatched eggs remain firmly glued onto the hair for weeks, months, or even years. If nits are discovered, look for a live (crawling) louse. If none is found, then the logical conclusion is that the child is likely no longer

infested. Check again occasionally, but do not treat unless a live louse is found. The vast majority of objects presumed to be nits are simply bits of debris. But because bits of debris are frequently misidentified as lice eggs, many children are misdiagnosed, sent home, and treated unnecessarily.

Head lice are acquired mainly by direct head-to-head contact with an infested person. Inanimate objects (such as combs, brushes, hair accessories and other such items) serve little, if any role in the transmission of head lice. Louse combs used to remove lice should be rinsed in hot water and wiped clean with a towel or a small brush. Generally, hot water from the water faucet will be sufficient to kill lice and their eggs with just a few seconds of exposure. If the water is too hot for washing hands, it is likely adequate to kill lice and eggs quickly on combs. Boiling the water is excessive for this purpose, and risks causing burns and damaging some combs. Shared helmets and headphones in schools or recreational settings would rarely, if ever, harbor an occasional head louse or nit. The effort necessary to effectively inspect and clean these devices, however, is not warranted. Shared lockers or coat hooks pose even less risk as sources of contamination.

What parents can do to eliminate and prevent head lice

Before considering any kind of treatment, find a live (crawling) insect and make sure it is a louse. If lice are found on one family member, then all other children and adults in the home should be checked as well. If the hair is fairly fine and not tangled, then a lice or nit comb can be useful in detecting and removing these insects and their eggs. Some, but not all, infestations can be eliminated by this method. If combing is difficult, impractical, or has been unsuccessful, then pediculicides can prove valuable. Pediculicides are special insecticide products registered by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to treat lice. Most over-the-counter (OTC) pediculicides contain pyrethrins (extracts of chrysanthemum flowers) or their synthetic equivalent. Used as directed on the package, these products can be effective at killing lice. A repeat treatment, about 10 days after the first, is often needed.