

HEAD LICE INFORMATION SHEET

In the United States for a period of about 30 years lice outbreaks were uncommon. Since DDT was (appropriately) banned in 1973, the number of cases of lice has risen steadily. Today, there are about 12 million cases per year in the United States alone. Each year many day care centers, schools, neighborhoods, extended families, and small family units face this problem.

Adult lice are six-legged wingless insects, 2-4 mm long. They have translucent grayish-white bodies, and often look a bit like a grain of rice with six legs. Lice completely depend on the blood extracted from humans for existence, and thus will starve to death if not on a human for 55 hours.

Adult lice can freely move around a head of hair, travel to another person, to clothing, to plastic combs or brushes, or to upholstered furniture. Adult lice usually live for about a month on a human host.

Lice eggs are called nits. These white, translucent, pinpoint-size eggs are laid near the base of hair shafts, and move outward as the hair grows (nits found near the tips of long hairs suggest a long-standing infestation). Nits are glued tightly to the side of the hair shafts, and cannot be moved along the shafts or knocked off with fingers. The eggs hatch after 6 to 10 days. The empty eggs remain attached to the hair shaft. The newborn larvae must feed on human blood within 24 hours, or they will starve to death. The larvae become sexually mature adult lice within about one week.

Lice spread from person to person when heads touch. But since they can live off a person for up to 55 hours, they are also commonly spread via stuffed animals, hats, headphones, combs, brushes, towels, clothing, car seats, sofa cushions, and bedding.

The best way to diagnose head lice is to inspect the head of anyone who might have been exposed to them, using a bright light. A magnifying glass can make the job easier. Part the hair all the way down to the scalp in very small swathes, looking both for moving insects and nits. The entire head must be inspected to make sure there is no problem. Careful attention should be given to the nape of the neck, and around the ears, the most common locations for nits. Even one nit in the hair should be treated.

Historically, the main method for getting rid of lice has been mechanical – physically removing the nits, or “nit picking”. About 30 years ago, powerful pesticides were introduced as lice treatments. Over the last several years, however, the lice have become increasingly resistant to these medicines. This year has been the worst yet. Now, once again, mechanical nit removal is the cornerstone of lice treatment, although the medicines can still be a real help.