

FACTS ABOUT

Head Lice

Direct head-to-head contact is the way head lice are spread. (The environment is not the source) To get rid of head lice, two treatments are needed. Follow-up of all close contacts is very important.

Head lice are a nuisance but not a health hazard. They don't result from a lack of cleanliness.

Anyone can get head lice. School children get them more often because they're frequently in head-to-head contact. Parents can get head lice from children.

Sometimes the source is another adult in close contact with the children. Head lice crawl quickly from one person's head to another.

What to Look For

These tiny, flat insects have no wings and cannot jump or fly. Head lice live and breed on the hair of the head. They're just 1-2 mm long, grayish-brown in color, and hard to see. Adult female lice lay a great many eggs.

Laid close to the scalp, the very tiny eggs are half the size of a pinhead, oval in shape, gray to brown in color, and difficult to see. They may look like dandruff but they're firmly glued to the hair and can't be flicked off. The eggs hatch in about 7 to 8 days. White, empty eggshells are called nits. Those more than one cm from the scalp (due to hair growth) have hatched or died. Head lice don't live long and their eggs don't hatch away from the warmth and humidity of the scalp.

Itching and scratching are common signs of head lice. Often there are no symptoms at all. Because other scalp conditions also cause itching, the best way to check for lice is to look for nits. Act quickly if you find them.

How to Get Rid of Head Lice

1. Treating head lice requires two treatments, 7 to 10 days apart in most cases.
2. Get a head lice shampoo or cream rinse from your drugstore. You don't need a prescription. Ask your pharmacist if you have any questions. Use head lice products only when lice or nits are present.
3. If you are pregnant or breast-feeding consult your physician or telephone the Motherisk Program at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto at (416) 813-6780. If you're treating others, wear plastic or rubber gloves.
4. Consult your physician regarding treatment:
 - Of children under age 2
 - Of person with seizure disorders
 - For lice on eyebrows, eyelashes or beard
 - If the skin of the scalp is broken or infected
5. When choosing a product, read the list of contents. Don't use a product if the person being treated is allergic to any of its ingredients. In Ontario the most common head lice products contain permethrin or pyrethrins. Follow the directions very carefully.
 - Permethrin (eg. NIX Crème Rinse) should not be used for persons with a known allergy to chrysanthemums, synthetic pyrethroids, or pyrethrin. Do not use on children under age 2 unless directed by a physician. Before treating, the hair should be washed with a conditioner-free shampoo, rinsed with water, and towel-dried. A conditioner should not be used. Itching may increase for a while after treatment but this is not a concern
 - Pyrethrins (eg. R&C Shampoo / Conditioner) should not be used for anyone with a known allergy to ragweed, chrysanthemums, synthetic pyrethroids, or pyrethrin.
 - Lindane (eg. pms-LINDANE Shampoo) should not be used for infants or children under age 6. For older children, caution is recommended, as the potential for toxic effects is greater in the young. Apply to dry hair and use only as directed.
 - Acetomicellar Complex (SH-206 Shampoo) should not be used for children under 2 1/2.

Sometimes head lice resist one product. If live lice are found 24 hours after the first treatment, try another product followed by the second treatment as outlined below.

6. **When using a head lice product:**

- Timing is important. If the product is rinsed off too soon, lice and eggs may not be killed. If left on too long, you're causing unneeded exposure to the lice-killing chemicals.
- Rinsing the child's hair under a tap (instead of the shower or bathtub) will limit skin exposure and prevent the child from swallowing some of the product.
- These products should not be used near the eyes, nose or mouth. A towel held tightly over the eyes will protect them during treatment.
- When treating another person, wear plastic or rubber gloves to avoid unnecessary exposure.
- Wash your hands well immediately after using a head lice product.
- Store unused head lice products away from the reach of young children.

7. **Second Treatment:**

Head lice products kill the head lice and many of the eggs but one treatment usually doesn't kill all the eggs.

- Apply a second treatment 7-10 days to kill any newly hatched lice before they can mature enough to lay eggs or transfer to a new head. (When SH 206 is used, retreat in 48 hours). Repeat the treatment only once.
- After the second treatment and removal on the nits check the head twice a week for four weeks to make sure all lice are gone.
- If the problem continues, see your family doctor.
- Check young school-age children regularly for the lice; more often if there is an outbreak.

During outbreaks, schools can plan activities so that head-to-head contact is reduced. Coat hooks should be well spaced, if possible.

To Remove Nits:

With the two-treatment approach, nit removal is not essential. However, removing the nits after treatment makes it easier to see new infestations. This aids in control and improves appearance.

- Bright, natural light helps you see the nits.
- Comb hair to remove snarls, then take hold of lock of hair. Use your thumbnail against your first finger to strip the nits from the hair starting from the roots right down to the tips. Place the nits in a bag. Pin back that lock of hair and continue until all nits are removed. Try to remove the eggs very close to the scalp.
- You can also comb-out the nits using a fine-tooth comb. This is easier if a crème rinse is used after treatment but avoid after use of NIX. Some fine-tooth combs work better than others. Eggs very close to the scalp may need to be removed by hand.

Close Contacts

Follow-up of all close contacts is very important to prevent the spread and protect your child from being re-infested. Check the heads of all family members and those affected at the same time. Also suggest other close contacts be checked, such as grandparents or other family members, close friends, neighbors or babysitters.

Tell your child's school or daycare centre, and children's group or team leader so the parents can be told to check their children's heads. Also tell the parents of all playmates.

Cleaning Personal Items

Extra housecleaning and use of insecticide sprays are not needed. However, you will want to wash combs and brushes, headgear, pillowcases, sheets and towels in hot water.

Points to Remember

- An untreated source among close contacts is a common reason for reoccurrence.
- Head lice do not live on dogs, cats or other animals, only on humans.
- Keeping hair short will not prevent head lice.
- Check young school-age children regularly for head lice; more often if there is an outbreak.
- During outbreaks, schools can plan activities so that head-to-head contact is reduced. Coat hooks should be well spaced, if possible.

For further information, contact your local Northwestern Health Unit office located in:

Kenora	468-3147	Ear Falls	222-3098	Rainy River	852-3268
Dryden	223-3301	Emo	482-2211	Red Lake	727-2626
Fort Frances	274-9827	Ignace	934-2236	Sioux Lookout	737-2292
Atikokan	597-6871	Pickle Lake	928-2234		

Ministry of Health, Public Health Branch, Adapted from Canadian Paediatric Society's December 1996 Statement on Head Lice Infestations, Paediatric Child Health, Vol. 1, Number 3.

TABLE 1: Pediculicides available in Canada for treating Head Lice

Trade Name	Active Ingredient/ Insecticide Group	Formulation	Areas of Concern	Method of Use ♦
Nix	Permethrin <ul style="list-style-type: none"> pyrethroid 	Crème rinse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible emergence of resistant organisms Mild dermal reactions in approximately 1% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wash hair with shampoo, rinse with water and dry well Do not apply any conditioner Apply sufficient crème rinse to saturate hair and scalp Leave on for 10 minutes Rinse off with water Consider re-treatment after 7-10 days (see test below)
Kwellada	Lindane <ul style="list-style-type: none"> cyclodienes 	Shampoo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not always ovicidal Possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply to dry hair in a sufficient quantity to saturate hair

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organochlorine 		<p>neurotoxicity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mild dermal reactions ~2-3% • Not to be used in children under 6 	<p>thoroughly</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in for 4 minutes • Add water a little at a time to form a lather • Continue shampooing for another 4 minutes • Rinse thoroughly • Repeat in 7-10 days
R&C Shampoo	Pyrethrin	Shampoo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not always ovicidal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply to dry hair sufficient to soak thoroughly • Allow to remain on area for 10 minutes • Add small quantities of water, working into the hair until lather forms • Rinse thoroughly • Repeat in 7-10 days
Lice-Enz	Pyrethrin	Mousse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not always ovicidal • Possible anaphylaxis • Possible corneal damage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply as much foam as needed to the hair and scalp until entirely wet • Allow to remain for no more than 10 minutes • Wash hair thoroughly with warm water and shampoo or soap • Repeat in 7-10 days

- ◇ Wear plastic or rubber gloves when applying pediculicide to other people and rinsing under a tap instead of a shower to decrease skin exposure.