

Head Lice Fact Sheet

Head lice are tiny insects that live on the scalp (in the hair) and feed on small amounts of blood. They cannot fly or jump — they spread when heads or hair touch. Human head lice only live on humans, so pets cannot get or spread them.

What to look for?

Head lice:

- Small and flat, and hard to see.
- About the size of a sesame seed.
- Grey-brown in colour.
- Live close to the scalp surface.
- Crawl quickly (they don't fly or jump).



Nits (lice eggs):

- About the size of a grain of sand.
- Brown when alive, but turn white when hatched or dead.
- Stick to the hair close to the scalp.
- Hard to remove.



Lice or nits are found close to the scalp, particularly **around the ears**, at the **back of the neck** and **forehead**.

Use bright light (like daylight) when checking for head lice. Part the hair into small sections and comb wet hair to help see the lice and nits better. If you only find nits, look carefully for live lice. If **both** lice and nits are present, a full treatment is recommended.

Getting rid of head lice

Only treat your child if you see **live** lice. A pharmacist can help you choose a lice treatment. Check the ingredients and directions carefully. Make sure that the treatment is safe for your child's age — some shouldn't be used on younger children.

Head lice treatment

- Insecticidal treatments kill head lice: Apply twice, 7 to 10 days apart.
- Non-insecticidal treatments: May require multiple applications.
- Follow all instructions carefully and comb out lice and nits every day between treatments.

Nit removal

- A fine-toothed comb helps remove nits and lice from hair.
- Use a bright light.
- Work in small sections, combing from the scalp to the ends.
- Comb the hair every day, for at least two weeks to ensure all the nits are removed.

Alternative lice treatments

Some people look for home remedies to treat lice. Many alternative treatments, such as mineral oil, vinegar, petroleum jelly, mayonnaise, or hair gel have not been proven to work. The Canadian Paediatric Society warns that gasoline and kerosene are extremely dangerous and should never be used.

Cleaning personal items

After treating head lice, clean personal items to avoid getting lice again:

- Wash combs, brushes, and hair accessories with hot, soapy water until all lice and nits are gone. Then soak them in very hot water for 10 minutes.
- Wash clothes, bed sheets, pillowcases, blankets, and towels in hot soapy water then dry them in a hot dryer for 15 minutes.
- For things you can't wash, place them in a sealed plastic bag for 14 days.
- You don't need to clean your home more than usual. Do not use insecticide sprays.
- You don't need to wash pets – human head lice cannot live on animals.



Consult a health care provider about treatment

Most lice cases can be treated at home. In some cases, it's best to check with a health care provider (like a doctor, nurse or pharmacist) before starting treatment.

Consult if:

- You are allergic to any of the treatment ingredients.
- You are pregnant or breastfeeding.
- You are treating a child under 2 years old.
- You are treating someone with a seizure disorder.
- You are treating lice on eyebrows, eyelashes or a beard.
- The scalp has open sores, cuts, or signs of infection.
- The lice problem does not go away.

Preventing the spread of head lice

Head lice spread through close contact, but there are simple ways to reduce the risk. Regular checks and good habits help stop lice from spreading at home, school, and in the community.



- Check your child's head regularly.
- Check every day during lice outbreaks at school or daycare, or whenever school or daycare staff ask you to.
- Teach your child not to share items such as hairbrushes or combs, hair accessories, headphones, hats or helmets, scarves and neck warmers, and towels.
- If one family member has lice, check everyone in the household for lice and nits. Other family members might get them too.
- Inform your child's school, daycare, or activity group (like sports teams or clubs). This way, other parents can check their children's hair.
- Treat everyone with lice at the same time to prevent lice from coming back.



For more information

If you have further questions about head lice, call Health811 at 8-1-1 to speak with a nurse for confidential health advice at no cost.

Useful links:

- [Parenting in Ottawa](#)
- [Caring for Kids](#)