

## Message from the Parish Nurses

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### HEAD LICE

**Head lice are found worldwide. In the United States, infection with head lice is most common among pre-school children attending child care, elementary schoolchildren, and the household members of infected children. According to the CDC there isn't any reliable data on how many people in the USA get head lice each year. However, an estimated 6 to 12 million infestations occur each year in the USA among children 3 to 11 years old. Head lice can be a nuisance but they have not been shown to spread disease. It is important to understand what head lice are and how to treat.**

#### WHAT ARE HEAD LICE?

The head louse, or *Pediculus humanus capitis*, is a parasitic insect that can be found on the head, eyebrows, and eyelashes of people.

Head lice has three forms: the eggs (also called a nit), the nymph, and the adult.

- **Egg/Nit:** Nits are lice eggs laid by the adult female at the base of the hair shaft nearest the scalp. Nits are firmly attached to the hair shaft and are oval-shaped, and very small (about the size of a knot in thread) and are hard to see. Nits often appear yellow or white although live nits sometimes appear to be the same color as the hair of the infected person. Nits can be confused with dandruff, scabs, or hair spray droplets. The nits usually take 8-9 days to hatch and are usually located no more than ¼ inch from the base of the hair shaft.
- **Nymph:** A nymph is an immature louse that hatches from the nit. A nymph looks like an adult head louse but is smaller. To live, a nymph must feed on blood. Nymphs mature into adults about 9-12 days after hatching from the nit.
- **Adult:** The fully grown and developed adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs, and is tan to grayish-white in color. Adult head lice may look darker in persons with dark hair than in persons with light hair. To survive, adult head lice must feed on blood. An adult head louse can live about 30 days on a person's head but will die within 1 to 2 days if it falls off a person. Adult female head lice are usually larger than males and can lay about six eggs each day.

#### WHERE ARE HEAD LICE MOST COMMONLY FOUND?

- Head lice and head lice nits are found almost exclusively on the scalp, particularly around and behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the head.
- Head lice or head lice nits sometimes are found on the eyelashes or eyebrows but this is uncommon.
- Head lice hold tightly to hair with hook-like claws at the end of their six legs.
- Head lice nits are cemented firmly to the hair shaft and can be difficult to remove even after the nymphs hatch and empty shells also known as 'casings' remain.

#### WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF HEAD LICE INFESTATION?

- Tickling feelings of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of the head louse.
- Irritability and difficulty sleeping; head lice are most active in the dark.
- Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected with bacteria found on the person's skin.

#### HOW DID MY CHILD GET HEAD LICE?

**Head lice move by crawling; they can't hop or fly.**

Head-to-head contact with an already infected person is the most common way to get head lice. Head-to-head contact is common during play at school, at home, and elsewhere (such as: sports activities, playground, slumber parties, and camp).

Although uncommon, head lice can spread by sharing clothing or belongings. This happens when lice crawl, or nits attached to shed hair hatch, and get on the shared clothing or belongings. Examples include:

- Sharing clothing (hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms) or articles (hair ribbons, barrettes, combs, brushes, towels, stuffed animals) recently worn or used by an infected person.
- Lying on a bed, couch, pillow, or carpet that has recently been in contact with an infected person.
- **Note:** dogs, cats, and other pets **do not** play a role in the spread of head lice.

By Barbara Mueller, RN, Faith Community Nurse

Source: Center for Disease Control and Prevention

More information can be found at:

[www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/gen\\_info](http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/gen_info)

**Visit:** [www.StAgnesShepherdstown.org](http://www.StAgnesShepherdstown.org) for **"How Is Head Lice Infestation Diagnosed?"** And **"How Is Head Lice Infestation Treated?"** Click on Parish Health Newsletter.

## HOW IS HEAD LICE INFESTATION DIAGNOSED?

The diagnosis of a head lice infestation is best made by finding a live nymph or adult louse on the scalp or hair of a person. Because nymphs and adults are very small, move quickly, and avoid light, they can be difficult to find. Head lice move by crawling; they do not hop or fly.

- Use of a magnifying lens and a fine-toothed comb may be helpful to find live lice.
- If crawling lice are not seen, finding nits firmly attached within a ¼ inch of base of the hair shaft strongly suggest, but does not confirm, that a person is infested and should be treated.
- Nits that are attached more than ¼ inch from the base of the hair shaft are almost always dead or already hatched.
- Nits are often confused with other things found in the hair such as: dandruff, dirt particles, and hair spray droplets.
- If you are not sure if a person has head lice, the diagnosis should be made by your health care provider, local health department or school nurse.

## HOW IS HEAD LICE INFESTATION TREATED?

**Treat the infested person(s):** Requires using an Over-the-counter (OTC) or prescription medication. Follow these treatment steps.

1. Before applying treatment, it may be helpful to remove clothing that can become wet or stained during treatment.
2. Apply lice medicine, also called pediculicide, according to the instructions contained in the box or printed on the label. If the infested person has very long hair (longer than shoulder length), it may be necessary to use a second bottle. Pay special attention to instructions on the label or in the box regarding how long the medication should be left on the hair and how it should be washed out.

### WARNING:

Do not use a combination shampoo/conditioner, or conditioner before using lice medicine. Do not re-wash the hair for 1-2 days after the lice medicine is removed.

- Have the infested person put on clean clothing after treatment.
- If a few lice are still found 8-12 hours after treatment, but are moving more slowly than before, do not retreat. The medicine may take longer to kill all the lice, Comb dead and any remaining live lice out of the hair using a toothed comb.

- If, after 8-12 hours of treatment, no dead lice are found and lice seem as active as before, the medicine may not be working. Do not retreat until speaking with your health care provider; a different pediculicide may be necessary.
- Nit (head lice egg) combs, often found in head lice medicine package, should be used to comb nits and lice from the hair shaft. Many flea combs made for cats and dogs are also effective.
- After each treatment, checking the hair and combing with a nit comb every 2-3 days may decrease the chance of self-re-infestation. Continue to check for 2-3 weeks to be sure all lice and nits are gone. Nit removal is not needed when treating with spinosad topical suspension (a prescription medication).
- Retreatment is meant to kill any surviving hatched lice before they produce new eggs. For some medications, retreatment is recommended routinely about a week after the first treatment (7-9 days, depending on the medication) and for others only if crawling lice are seen during this period. Retreatment with lindane shampoo is not recommended.

### MEDICATIONS:

If you aren't sure which medicine to use or how to use a particular medicine, always ask your physician, pharmacist, or other health care provider. Before treating young children please consult the child's doctor.

### SUPPLEMENTAL MEASURES:

Head lice do not survive long if they fall off a person and cannot feed. Follow these steps to help avoid re-infestation by lice that have recently fallen off the hair or crawled onto clothing or furniture.

- Machine wash and dry clothing, be linens, and other items that the infested person wore or used during the 2 days before treatment using hot water (130°F) laundry cycle and the high heat drying cycle. Clothing and items that are not washable can be dry-cleaned **OR** sealed in a plastic bag and stored for 2 weeks.
- Soak combs and brushes in hot water (at least 130°F) for 5-10 minutes.
- Vacuum the floor and furniture, particularly where the infested person sat or lay.
- Do not use fumigant sprays; they can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.

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Source: Center for Disease Control and Prevention  
More information on medications can be found at:  
[www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/gen\\_info](http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/gen_info)