

Head Lice Information for Parents...Lynn Hanson, R.N., MGSD Nurse

Information compiled from National Pediculosis Association. The district policy and treatment instructions can be found under [links for parents](#) and [health services](#) at www.mononagrove.org

How do you get Head Lice? Many people associate head lice with uncleanliness or even poverty. However, head lice do not discriminate between clean or dirty individuals nor do they care about their financial backgrounds. Their goal is to survive, and to do so they need a human host. For head lice, any human host will suffice and therefore, all humans are susceptible. Head lice are human parasites and have probably been here since the beginning of time. Because they are a human parasite, the head louse can't thrive on pets. They do not come from out of the air or the dirt.

Head lice do not jump, hop or fly (they don't have wings) and generally they can't survive off the host's head for longer than 24-48 hours. Head lice can be spread from one human to another human when there is direct contact of the head or hair with an infested individual. Indirect spread through sharing personal items like hats, scarves, towels, hair brushes or combs, hair ties and so on is much less likely but may occur. Even more rare is the possibility that head lice can be spread via a pillow or headrest. However, head lice don't tend to leave a head in search of new hosts. If a louse inadvertently comes off the head and is left behind (i.e. on a pillow or headrest) it may be possible for the louse to infest another individual who places his/her head in that area.

Symptoms of Infestation: The itching that occurs when lice bite and suck blood from the scalp is a primary symptom of infestation, although not everyone will experience the itching. Children seen scratching their heads frequently or intensely should be examined.

What to look for: Lice are small, (about the size of a sesame seed) wingless insects. They have 6 legs equipped with claws to grasp the hair. They are clear in color when they are hatched, and then quickly develop a reddish-brown color after feeding. They move very quickly and shy away from light making them difficult to see. Diagnosis is more often made on the basis of finding the nits (eggs) that are laid by the adult female louse. Nits (eggs) are small yellowish-white, oval-shaped eggs that are "glued" to the side of the hair shaft at an angle. They do not move like dandruff or lint/debris in the hair. Nits may be found throughout the hair at any distance from the scalp but are most often located at the nape of the neck, behind the ears and frequently on the crown. It helps to use natural light and a magnifying glass or reading glasses when looking for them.

What is the best treatment?

1. The NPA (National Pediculosis Association) recommends manual removal of lice and nits because it is the safest method to use on children. They recommend the Lice Meister comb. This method requires a parent who is very diligent in using the comb every day, or in other words, the comb is only as good as the person doing the combing.
2. Lice killing products (pediculocides) such as Rid, Nix etc.: This option may not kill all the lice as head lice appear to be resistant at times to these products. If parents choose this method they should take caution to following the product's directions for use carefully as the pesticides in these products may be toxic.

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3. Olive oil: according to entomologists, head lice need oxygen so if you saturate the hair with olive oil and leave it on for a minimum of 8 hours it kills the lice by suffocating them. Many parents have reported success with this method and it's easier to wash out than the more solid oils like Crisco or like Vaseline. Parents have tried other concoctions such as Mayonnaise but some say they work and some say they don't. (Mayonnaise contains some oil so probably works by suffocation similar to olive oil if left on the hair long enough).

Nit Picking:

No current treatment is 100% ovicidal (nit/egg killing). Therefore, after a treatment is done the nit picking must begin. This is the area of most frustration. However, after removal of the live lice, nit removal is most important to prevent a reinfestation because if the nits hatch the problem continues. The NPA recommends nit removal and "no nit policies" for a couple reasons. First, because without a microscope we don't know for sure if a nit is dead or alive and the time it takes to determine dead or alive is better time spent removing the nits. Secondly, children like adults, don't want them left in their hair...dead or alive. Nits can be combed out with a good nit comb. The NPA recommends the Lice Meister comb. Nits can also be picked out using your fingernails. The Monona Grove School District has a "no nit policy" that allows parents 4 days after the initial treatment to remove all the nits. To prevent the spread of head lice at school, Monona Grove Schools sends students home when:

1. Untreated nits (eggs) are found.
2. Live lice are found.
3. Nits are still present on the 4th day after the initial treatment.

Cleaning the Environment:

Head lice don't infest homes and schools. They infest humans. Therefore, it is most important to invest your time and energy into treating the host(s) and removing the nits. Some cleaning of the environment is helpful to catch those lice that have inadvertently come off their host and to decrease the chance of spread and reinfestation:

1. Vacuum thoroughly: furniture, carpets, and car upholstery.
2. Machine wash and dry (using hot cycles): clothing, coats, hats, cloth toys, towels that the infested individual has had contact with in the past 48 hours.
3. Items that cannot be washed can be sealed in a plastic bag for 2 weeks.
4. Combs and hairbrushes can be soaked in hot soapy water.

Note: There are many lice killing products for use on the environment. The above simple measures are equally effective, less expensive, and safer as they don't expose children to pesticides.

Who should be informed?

If you think you have found head lice or nits, don't panic. Confirm your suspicion by having your child checked by someone experienced. Your health care provider, school nurse or trained school office staff can help. Let the school know. Keeping it secret is usually not helpful to anyone. Once confirmed, begin the treatment process above. Let close friends, relatives, childcare providers who may have had recent direct contact with your child know. Close contacts should be checked so if lice/nits are found on these individuals they can be treated as well. This helps to prevent re-infestations.