

# Lice Treatment Guide for Parents



(Actual size of 3 live lice forms compared to a penny (CDC photo))

## What are Head Lice?

Head lice are parasitic insects that feed on human blood several times a day and live close to the human scalp. They are a common nuisance among school age children and can affect anyone regardless of family income, social status or level of personal hygiene or cleanliness. They do not transmit disease and are not a serious medical condition.

## How did my child get head lice?

Head lice move by crawling. They cannot hop or fly and do not live on pets. Head lice are spread primarily by direct contact with the hair of an infected person. Head-to-head contact is the most common way to get head lice. Head-to-head contact is common during play at school, at home, and elsewhere (sports activities, playground, slumber parties, and camp). A person can also get head lice after sharing clothing or belongings recently worn or used by an infected person (clothes, brushes, combs, helmets, stuffed animals, etc.). Pets are neither carriers nor hosts of human lice.

## What do head lice look like?

An adult head louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs and is tan to grayish white in color. They move quickly, especially when exposed to light. They prefer living on the scalp, at the nape of the neck and behind the ears where it is warmer. This is also where you may find nits (lice eggs). Nits are attached to the hair shaft by a sticky substance that cannot be shaken off or flicked away. The nits are easy to identify. They have a teardrop shape and are usually found within ¼ inch of the scalp in an active case.

## Home Treatment

According to current recommendations by the Center for Disease Control and the American Academy of Pediatrics, head lice should be treated with a medicated lice killing shampoo. Read all instructions on the package insert carefully before starting the treatment. ***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.
3. **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.
4. Have the infested person put on clean clothing after treatment.
5. If a few live 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 fine-toothed nit comb.
6. 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. If your health care provider recommends a different pediculicide, carefully follow the treatment instructions contained in the box or printed on the label.
7. Nit (head lice egg) combs, often found in lice medicine packages, should be used to comb nits and lice from the hair shaft. Many flea combs made for cats and dogs are also effective.
8. After each treatment, checking the hair and combing with a nit comb to remove nits and lice every 2–3 days may decrease the chance of self-reinfestation. 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.

9. Retreatment is meant to kill any surviving hatched lice before they produce new eggs. For some drugs, retreatment is recommended routinely about a week after the first treatment (7–9 days, depending on the drug) and for others only if crawling lice are seen during this period. Retreatment with lindane shampoo is not recommended.
10. **Supplemental Measures:** Head lice do not survive long if they fall off a person and cannot feed. You don't need to spend a lot of time or money on housecleaning activities. Follow these steps to help avoid re-infestation by lice that have recently fallen off the hair or crawled onto clothing or furniture.
11. Machine wash and dry clothing, bed linens, and other items that the infested person wore or used during the 2 days before treatment using the 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.
12. Soak combs and brushes in hot water (at least 130°F) for 5–10 minutes.
13. Vacuum the floor and furniture, particularly where the infested person sat or lay. However, the risk of getting infested by a louse that has fallen onto a rug or carpet or furniture is very small. Head lice survive less than 1–2 days if they fall off a person and cannot feed; nits cannot hatch and usually die within a week if they are not kept at the same temperature as that found close to the human scalp. Spending much time and money on housecleaning activities is not necessary to avoid reinfestation by lice or nits that may have fallen off the head or crawled onto furniture or clothing.
14. Do not use fumigant sprays; they can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.

## Prevention

Head lice are spread most commonly by direct head-to-head (hair-to-hair) contact. However, much less frequently they are spread by sharing clothing or belongings onto which lice have crawled or nits attached to shed hairs may have fallen. The risk of getting infested by a louse that has fallen onto a carpet or furniture is very small. Head lice survive less than 1–2 days if they fall off a person and cannot feed; nits cannot hatch and usually die within a week if they are not kept at the same temperature as that found close to the scalp.

The following are steps that can be taken to help prevent and control the spread of head lice:

- Avoid head-to-head (hair-to-hair) contact during play and other activities at home, school, and elsewhere (sports activities, playground, slumber parties, camp).
- Do not share clothing such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, hair ribbons, or barrettes.
- Do not share combs, brushes, or towels. Disinfest combs and brushes used by an infested person by soaking them in hot water (at least 130°F) for 5–10 minutes.
- Do not lie on beds, couches, pillows, carpets, or stuffed animals that have recently been in contact with an infested person.
- Machine wash and dry clothing, bed linens, and other items that an infested person wore or used during the 2 days before treatment using the 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.
- Vacuum the floor and furniture, particularly where the infested person sat or lay. However, spending much time and money on housecleaning activities is not necessary to avoid reinfestation by lice or nits that may have fallen off the head or crawled onto furniture or clothing.
- Do not use fumigant sprays or fogs; they are not necessary to control head lice and can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.
- To help control a head lice outbreak in a community, school, or camp, children can be taught to avoid activities that may spread head lice.

**This and additional information can be found on [the Center for Disease Control and Prevention Head Lice website](https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/index.html). <https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/index.html>**