

Is There a Louse in the House?



A Head Lice Information Package For Parents/Family

NORTHERN HEALTH
authority

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INTRODUCTION

Head lice can affect anyone. Head lice are annoying and may cause itching, but they do not transmit or cause disease. Children and adult's reactions to head lice can subject children to teasing, bullying and isolation. Reactions to head lice can significantly interfere with a child's emotional well-being, social status in the classroom and ability to learn. For these reasons, head lice infestations should be treated.

Current research shows that school exclusion, early dismissal and no-nit policies do not prevent or control head lice infestations. In fact, these practices further stigmatize children, erode their self-esteem and interfere with learning. These practices are also at odds with other health concerns. For example, children with colds or flu viruses have a greater potential for spreading illness but are seldom excluded from school because of these.

It is important to keep children from missing school. Children should not be excluded from school or sent home early because of head lice. Parents of children should be advised to treat children to prevent the negative emotional and social impact of head lice infestations.

NORTHERN HEALTH AUTHORITY POSITION STATEMENT

The Northern Health Authority does not support school exclusion, early dismissal and no-nit policies as these disrupt the education process and adversely affect children's self-esteem and social status in the classroom.

RATIONALE

- 1) Lice may be present on the scalp for weeks before they are discovered. Only 30 percent of individuals scratch their scalp when they have head lice. As children are often in the classroom for days or weeks before head lice are detected, there is no benefit in sending them home early.
- 2) Head lice infestations are often misdiagnosed. The presence of fluff or dandruff in the hair are often mistaken for nits. Also, the presence of nits does not mean a child has an active infestation. It is difficult to differentiate between nits and empty egg casings. Even under ideal conditions, 10-30% of nits do not hatch.
- 3) Head lice are frequently over diagnosed, which leads to overuse of pediculocides (chemical head lice products). Overuse of pediculocides can be hazardous to a child's health.
- 4) Negative reactions to head lice adversely affect children by subjecting them to teasing and bullying.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO...

- Be aware of the symptoms of head lice and the treatment procedures.
- Check the heads of all family members on a weekly basis. Increase this to daily head checks when a case of head lice has occurred in your child's classroom or one of the family members has been in contact with head lice.
- Treat the infested heads.
- Contact PHN for resources and further information when treatment has failed to rid your child's head of head lice.
- Teach your children not to share hair accessories, hats, coats, combs, brushes, etc. with others.

BIOLOGY

Head lice are very small –about 2 – 3 mm long. The colour of adults ranges from white to gray to brown and may vary with the skin or hair color of the person infested. Head lice are wingless so they can't fly or jump.

Nits (head lice eggs) are tiny oval specs about one third the size of a sesame seed. They are found glued to the strands of the hair, very close to the scalp. Nits hatch in about 7 days, mature in about 8 or 9 days and can then lay eggs. Lice are not able to move off the head until they are fully grown, which takes about 7 days.

They may live for 2 to 4 weeks on the human head, and during this time, females may lay up to 6 eggs a day. Off the human head, they survive for about 48 hours.

Active versus Inactive Head Lice Infestation

A person has an active infestation if head lice are found crawling on their head or there are many nits within 6mm of the scalp. Nits found further down the shaft of the hair (more than 6 mms from the scalp) have already hatched. Treatment is not recommended for people who have nits further than 6mm from the scalp.

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT HEAD LICE

“Sometimes I’m Misunderstood”



Myth 1: The presence of head lice is a sign of poor personal hygiene.

Fact: We head lice prefer a clean scalp. It doesn't matter your sex, age, race or how much money you have.

Myth 2: Only children get head lice.

Fact: We like adults as much as children, but it's easier to move from one child to another because of their close contact in daycare, preschools or schools.

Myth 3: If your head isn't itchy, you don't have lice.

Fact: Contrary to common thinking, we may be in your hair for weeks or months without making you itch. In fact, even though we are in your hair, only 1/3 of you will be scratching.

Myth 4: Long hair encourages infestation.

Fact: We are more interested in your scalp than your hair so cutting hair will not get rid of us.

Myth 5: Head lice can be “caught” from plants, pets and other animals.

Fact: I can live on YOU, but I can't live on your plants, pets or other animals.

Myth 6: Head lice can jump and fly from one person to another.

Fact: We don't have wings. We can't jump, but we can run quickly from one head to another "*wherever and whenever heads meet*".

We may hide in hats and other headgear, scarves, hair accessories, helmets, head phones, etc. We can only survive for up to 48 hours away from your head.

Myth 7: An itchy scalp following treatment is a sign of treatment failure.

Fact: Your scalp may be itchy for up to 10 days after successful treatment. If your head is itchy past 10 days, it may be a sign that I am still there or my friends have moved in!

Myth 8: Head lice cause disease. An outbreak of head lice is a public health emergency.

Fact: I am a nuisance but I do not carry germs or spread disease.

Myth 9: No nit policies are effective in eliminating head lice.

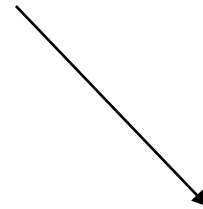
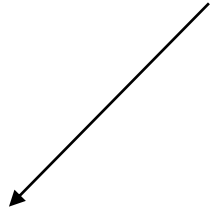
Fact: There is no evidence that shows no-nit policies reduce head lice infestations. Nits are removed to enhance the effectiveness of treatment, but should not be a reason to keep a child out of school.

Myth 10: The presence of nits means an active infestation.

Fact: 10-30% of children with nits never develop an active infestation.

TREATMENTS

Treatment Options



OPTION A

Chemical Shampoos

**Kill the Lice
&
Remove the
Nits**

Special lice shampoos are used because they have been tested and determined to be an effective and acceptable treatment

OPTION B

Wet-combing

**Remove the
Lice
&
Forget the Nits**

Non-chemical ways to find and eliminate head lice

Wet combing with hair conditioner immobilizes lice

Note: the research to support this method is unclear, but many people say it works

OPTION A CHEMICAL SHAMPOOS

Kill the Lice and Remove the Nits

This option involves using chemical head lice shampoos to kill the lice on the head and is followed up with removal of nits from the hair with a nit comb or with your fingers. Head lice shampoos should only be used on active infestations and should be applied when hair is dry. Research shows these shampoos work when used properly. **Overuse of these shampoos can be dangerous.**

Ask your pharmacist about head lice shampoos

STEPS TO FOLLOW

DO

1. Check the heads of all family members.
Check hair behind ears and back of neck for lice eggs (nits) – look for silvery oval specks “glued” to the strands of hair, very close to the scalp.
2. **READ HEAD LICE SHAMPOO DIRECTIONS CAREFULLY** and apply according to directions.
3. Remove nits.
Use a metal “nit” comb or use your fingers to pull nits from the strands of hair.
4. Only wash articles of clothing that come in direct contact with the head. Wash clothing, bed sheets and pillow cases in hot water, then dry in the hot cycle of the dryer. If articles can't be put in hot water or dried on a hot cycle, put the items in a sealed plastic bag for 48 hours, or place the bag in the deep freeze for 24 hours.
5. Apply head lice shampoo a second time 7 – 10 days later.
6. Check heads of family members throughout the year and if lice or ‘nits’ are found – start again at Step 1.

REMEMBER

If one person in the family has head lice, there is an increased chance that other family members have head lice too.

Dandruff can be flicked off the hair; nits are stuck to the hair strand.

Products differ in terms of whether to apply to dry or wet hair and the length of time the treatment remains on the head.

Experts differ in their opinions on the need to remove nits. Nit removal is included here as nit removal may help to ensure there will be less eggs on the head to hatch, thereby improving the effectiveness of the treatment.

There is no evidence that a major clean up of the house is necessary to get rid of head lice.

A second shampoo will make sure that any nits that have hatched after the first shampoo and are now lice, will be killed before they have a chance to lay any more eggs.

Two shampoos and a follow-up examination of the head with nit removal is the best way to make sure head lice are eliminated.

OPTION B WET-COMBING

Remove the Lice and Forget the Nits

This method is inexpensive, safe, and easily accessible, but takes more time. While there is no conclusive scientific evidence to support this treatment, many people report its success. This method is based on understanding the life-cycle of the louse. Wet-combing immobilizes lice so you can comb them out of the hair, but it does not remove the nits from the hair. It takes 7 days for a nit to hatch. Combing treatments are done every 3 – 4 days for two weeks to remove lice before they are fully grown and able to reproduce. Although not required, many people still choose to remove the nits with this method. You can use your fingers to pull the nits from the strands of hair.

STEPS TO FOLLOW

DO

1. Wash hair with ordinary shampoo and rinse.
2. Apply *lots* (about ½ cup – or more for long hair) of conditioner (any brand) to hair– **do not rinse out the conditioner.**
3. Comb sections of hair using a fine tooth metal comb. (You can use a metal nit comb).
Place the teeth of the comb into small sections of the hair at the roots. Firmly draw the comb toward you, through to the end of the hair. Check for lice after each stroke and clean the comb by wiping or rinsing. Continue section by section until the entire head is done. Make sure hair stays wet with conditioner during the combing.
4. Rinse hair. Leave hair dripping wet. Repeat combing without conditioner.
5. Repeat Steps 1 – 3 every 3 – 4 days for two weeks

REMEMBER

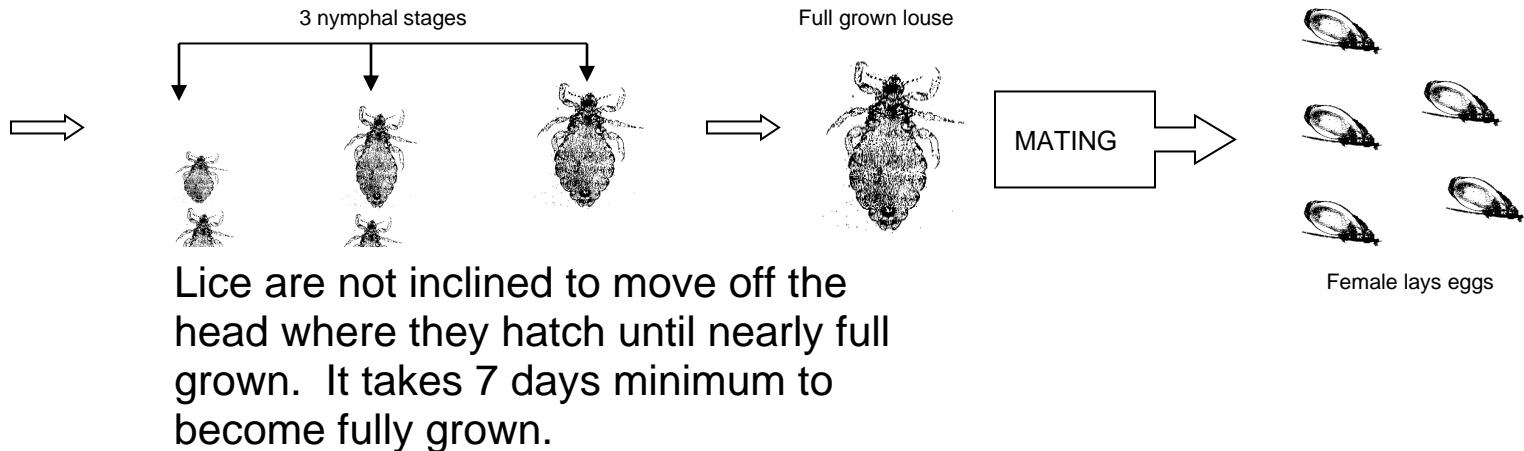
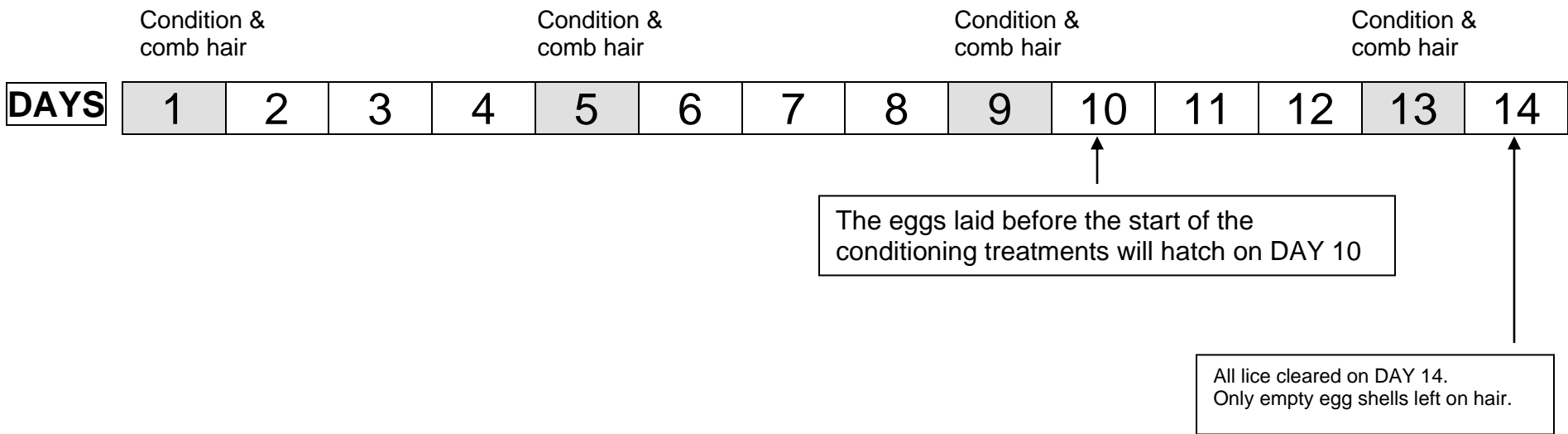
Untangle the hair with a regular wide tooth comb.

Note: On average, a Bug Busting session takes about ½ -1 hour per person.

Metal nit combs are available at the Pharmacy for approximately \$8.00.

Regularly removing the lice before they are fully grown and able to lay eggs will get rid of lice in 2 weeks.

THIS IS THE WAY TO LOSE THE LOUSE



WHERE YOU CAN GET CHEMICAL TREATMENTS FOR OPTION A

Chemical head lice treatments are available “over the counter” at pharmacies. (Ask your pharmacist for them). Costs range from about \$7.00 to \$11.00 per treatment depending on the pharmacy and brand of treatment purchased. A metal nit comb is purchased separately (see section on ‘Combs’ below).

Some school Parent Advisory Committees sponsor parents who can’t afford the treatment. Enquire at your school to see if this is available.

Families on income assistance can obtain head lice treatment products through the Ministry of Human Resources. The family must obtain a prescription from a family physician which can then be presented to the financial aid worker for reimbursement. If you can’t afford treatments, try option B.

Families with a treaty card can obtain head lice treatment products by obtaining a prescription from a family physician. Present the prescription to the pharmacist and the treatment will be covered for you.

A WORD ON COMBS

Some general things to keep in mind with combs are:

- regular combs will not remove head lice and nits (lice eggs)
- there are two types of special head lice combs: a head **lice** comb has more space between the teeth and will remove lice but not nits, which are much smaller than lice. A **nit** comb’s teeth have less space between the teeth and will remove both lice and nits
- plastic combs are not useful because they are so flexible that the teeth separate, break off and head lice and nits are bypassed as the comb is dragged through the hair

A metal NIT comb is recommended – The best nit combs have closely spaced metal teeth (about .15mm between teeth) that are about 1” to 1 ½” long. With a short-toothed comb, it is difficult to completely comb through most types of hair. The metal toothed comb is more durable; the teeth won’t spread, bend or break. The best metal combs have one side of the teeth beveled (on an angle). This allows you to place the teeth of the comb closer to the scalp each time you start to comb through the hair.

OTHER TREATMENTS

While there is no research to support the effectiveness of these approaches, some parents say they work.

Suffocating Remedies

These remedies involve applying mayonnaise, Vaseline or olive oil to the hair, covering the hair with a shower cap, leaving it on overnight (or 8 hours) and combing the lice out the next morning. Once the mayonnaise, Vaseline or olive oil are washed out with shampoo, the nits must be removed. Parents should be aware that it can take up to 10 days to remove all the Vaseline from the hair.

Combination Remedies

A combination approach involves treating hair with a chemical lice shampoo, then following this by applying one of the suffocating remedies listed above.

Naturopathic Remedies

For families wanting information on naturopathic remedies, the family can check with health food outlets, naturopathic practitioners or pharmacists for more information. **NOTE: Tea tree oil may be toxic and is not recommended by BC Poison Control.**

DANGEROUS AND UNDESIRABLE REMEDIES

The following treatments are not safe or effective.

- insect sprays (Raid)
- flea soap
- Chinese chalk
- oil (WD40)
- alcohol
- kerosene
- Gasoline
- shaving the head

WHEN TREATMENT DOESN'T WORK...

The most common causes of treatment failure include:

Reason #1: Inadequate information or understanding about head lice or the treatment method used.

The treatment methods can be confusing for many people, especially Option B and C which are based on understanding the life-cycle of the head lice. If unsure about the treatment or prevention of head lice, please talk to your Public Health Nurse.

Reason #2: The head lice shampoo was not applied properly.

The most common errors with using the shampoo include:

- Applying the shampoo to wet hair: Applying the shampoo to wet hair dilutes the chemicals in the shampoo. When exposed to water head lice close their breathing holes which also makes it harder for the chemicals to penetrate and kill the lice.
- Not using enough shampoo to thoroughly cover all the hair: Thick and long hair will require more head lice shampoo. Make sure you use enough head lice shampoo to thoroughly wet all hair – especially behind the neck and ears. One way to make sure that you have covered all the hair is to comb the product through the hair with a regular comb.
- Not leaving the shampoo on long enough: Chemicals in the shampoo take time to work. Make sure you follow the product instructions.
- Not applying the second treatment 7-10 days later: With option A (using lice shampoos), you need to use the shampoo again 7-10 days after the first treatment. This is because no product kills 100% of eggs and eggs take 7 days to hatch. Therefore, re-treatment in 7-10 days is a mandatory part of treatment.

Reason #3: The lice are resistant to the chemical in the shampoo.

Head lice may be resistant to the chemicals in the lice shampoo. If this happens, the chemicals are no longer able to kill all the lice. You can tell if the head lice are resistant by treating the head as directed, then checking for live lice. Use a fine tooth comb and look for movement. If the lice are all dead the shampoo is working. If the lice are still moving they are resistant to the chemicals in the shampoo. If the lice are resistant switch to another brand with a different "active ingredient" or try one of the other options. Ask your pharmacist for help.

Reason #4: The hair was previously washed using shampoo with built-in conditioner. Conditioners in regular shampoos can coat the hair and make it more difficult for chemicals in the head lice shampoos to cover the hair and scalp.

Reason #5: The nits weren't removed.

No shampoo is 100% effective. Nit removal will help ensure effectiveness of head lice shampoos and that there will be less eggs on the head to hatch.

Reason #6: The head lice shampoo is too old.

The active chemicals in many shampoos weaken over time. Check the expiry date on the head lice shampoo before you use it.

Reason #7: Another infestation has occurred.

If the above reasons don't explain why the treatment hasn't worked, re-infestation has likely occurred. Reinfestation almost always results from head to head contact with a person who has lice (re-infestation from the environment is very rare). If hair is clear one week after treatment, then head lice are found later, re-infestation has probably occurred. If you suspect re-infestation, ask your child with whom she/he has had head to head contact, and see if they can be checked. Look beyond your child's classroom; look at direct head to head contact opportunities your child has had during play and within the family.

What you should do

Immediate retreatment with a different pediculocide followed by a second treatment 7-10 days later is recommended. If infestation recurs or persists, alternative remedies like option B, are recommended to avoid excessive exposure to chemical head lice treatments.

EDUCATIONAL AND SUPPORT RESOURCES

NOTE: Most of the following resources were produced several years ago, so some information may differ from this handbook. The most recent research and practices for head lice management and control are included in this handbook.

Pamphlets:

1. **Getting Rid of Head Lice by Wet Combing: A Non-Chemical Method of Treating Head Lice**, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, June, 2000.
2. **Head Lice Health File**, Ministry of Health, December, 1993.
3. **Is There a Louse Handbook**, Northern Health Authority, August, 2003

Videos: (availability of specific videos may vary between Health Unit offices):

1. **Head to Head With Lice**, Department of Health Care and Epidemiology, UBC, 1992.
2. **The Facts of Lice**, Kelsey Productions, 1999.
3. **Head Lice to Dead Lice**, (1997), Sawyer Mac Productions.
4. **Advice on Lice**, (1990), Magic Lantern.

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