

What To Do When Your Child Gets Head Lice

This is written as from the perspective of a parent who has been through the whole lice ordeal with two children. I did a lot of research and spoke to my pediatrician, but I am not an expert, and I encourage you to do your own investigation. There's an abundance of information online; Here's a summary of what I learned:

Who gets lice, and how?

Everyone is susceptible, regardless of level of hygiene, socioeconomic status, age, or gender.

Preschool and elementary-age children and their families are infested most often.

Lice are very contagious. Prime conditions are close physical contact and sharing clothes (including dress-up clothes), headwear, brushes, combs, or towels. Kids whose hair touches as they read a book together, play a game, or hug each other might pass lice around. (It's a good idea to teach your children not to share hats, clothing, or brushes with anyone else, and to provide each child with his/her very own brush or comb.)

Lice cannot jump or fly from one person to another, only crawl, so transmission comes from direct physical contact with another person or their belongings.

What are lice and what do they look like?

Lice are parasitic insects found on the heads of people.

Lice go through three life stages: egg (or nit); nymph; adult. Nits are tiny, about the size of a knot in thread. They are laid by the adult female at the base of the hair shaft nearest the scalp and are very firmly attached. They are oval and usually yellow to white, though the ones in my children's hair were light brown. They take about one week to hatch. The nit hatches into a baby louse called a nymph. Nymphs mature into adults after about seven days. The adult louse is tan to grayish-white, about the size of a sesame seed, and has six legs. The adult lays about six eggs a day. Lice can live for 48 hours away from their host, and nits can survive for up to two weeks.

What are the symptoms of lice infestation?

Many people have no symptoms at all, but be alert for the following: tickling feeling of something moving through the hair; itching; sores on the head. Watch for your child idly scratching the same place on the head, especially at bedtime.

What should you do if you or your child becomes infected with lice?

In order to reduce the chances of reinfestation and to control the outbreak of head lice, it is important that everyone who's been in close contact with the infested person -- whether family members, schoolmates, or friends -- be informed, examined, and if necessary, treated. All infested persons should be treated at the same time.

Step one: Wash hair.

You may use any of the commercially available over-the-counter remedies sold at your local pharmacy. Be warned, however, that there has been a dramatic increase in the prevalence of head lice in recent years because lice have evolved to be resistant to these formulations. I therefore recommend following the shampoo treatment with an olive oil remedy, which suffocates any lice that might not have succumbed to the poison in the shampoo: saturate the person's hair in olive oil; wrap their head in plastic wrap; put a towel or shower cap over the plastic to catch the oil drips; leave on for at least three hours: wash out with dish soap (regular shampoo is not sufficiently grease-cutting.)

Step two: Comb hair every day until no nits are found for at least five days in a row.

This step is EXTREMELY IMPORTANT because the shampoos and other remedies don't kill the nits, only the lice that have already hatched.

Buy a fine metal louse comb; don't use the plastic one that comes with the shampoo.

Spray hair with water. (We used a water/vinegar solution because the "glue" holding the nits to the hair is very strong, and is weakened by the acid in the vinegar. If you use the vinegar mix, give your child a washcloth to hold over her face so that the vinegar doesn't get in her eyes and because the smell can be unpleasant. Spray on the vinegar solution about half an hour before you start combing to give it a chance to loosen the glue.)

Saturate hair with a thick conditioner.

Working in very bright light and with very small sections of hair at a time, comb from the scalp to the ends, and frequently smear the conditioner that collects on the louse comb on a white towel or paper towel. The nits will show up against the conditioner you've smoothed out on the towel. The nits are so tiny that even if you are careful, you might miss some each time you comb, so this process must be repeated every day until no nits show up for about a week. The process is arduous and annoying to your child (best bet is to put on their favorite show to watch), but unless you stick with it and are diligent, you might miss one nit, which will hatch, and you'll have to start the whole process again!) We found it helpful to pay a professional nitpicker (see, e.g., Lousey Nitpickers; Hair Fairies) to do this the first time so that we could learn the best technique to follow for the subsequent comb-throughs.

Wash hair with regular shampoo.

Step three – wash bedding, towels, clothing, stuffed animals, fuzzy toys.

Wash in very hot (125 degree), soapy water for 10 minutes, then dry on the hottest dryer cycle for at least 20 minutes. Items that cannot be washed should be dry-cleaned, ironed with a hot iron, or sealed in a plastic bag for two weeks.

Step four – disinfect all brushes and combs by soaking in very hot water for at least 10 minutes.

Step five – vacuum.

Thoroughly vacuum all carpeting, furniture, car interiors, car seats, strollers, throw-pillows, and other such items.

As arduous as it is, I recommend following steps three and five every day that you find nits when you do the comb-through, and then twice more during the week of clean comb-throughs. Keep in mind that we all lose dozens of hair a day, and if one of those with a nit attached falls behind the couch, for example, and the nit hatches into a louse, which crawls up the couch and onto your or your child's head, you'll be back to square one.