



HEAD LICE FAQ

Head lice is most common among preschool children attending childcare, elementary school children, and the affected child's household. However, you can control the spread of lice with prompt diagnosis, proper handling of each case, effective treatment and prevention.

Here are the facts about head lice, and answers to some frequently asked questions:

What do head lice (and their eggs) look like?

The adult head louse has six legs and is about the size of a sesame seed. Descriptions of their color vary, but generally they range from beige to gray and may become considerably darker when they feed.

Lice often appear to be the same color as the hair they've infested, making them hard to see with the naked eye. You can spot them most easily in the areas behind the ears and along the hairline on the back of the neck.

Female lice lay up to ten minuscule eggs a day. Lice eggs (called nits) are oval in shape. They may appear to be the color of their host's hair, ranging from white to yellow to brown.

What's the life cycle of a typical louse?

The female louse attaches her eggs to human hair shafts with a waterproof, glue-like substance. This ensures that the nits can't be washed, brushed, or blown away, unlike dandruff and other bits of stuff in the hair that often gets mistaken for nits.

She lays her eggs a fraction of an inch from the scalp, where it's nice and warm – just right for hatching. Nits typically hatch eight or nine days after they're laid. Once the eggs have hatched, their yellow or white shells remain attached to the hair shaft, moving farther from the scalp as the hair grows. As a result, empty nit shells attached to hairs are usually found farther away from the scalp than live eggs are.

Baby lice, known as nymphs, are not much bigger than the nits and tend to be light in color. Nine to 12 days later, they become adults and mate, the females lay their eggs, and the cycle continues.

An adult louse can live up to 30 days on the human head.

How did my child get lice?

Your child probably picked up lice from an infested sibling or playmate. Lice are crawling insects. They can't hop, jump, or fly, but they can crawl from one head to another when people put their heads together – for example, when they hug or lay their heads on the same pillow.

Once female lice find their way to a child's head, they lay eggs and begin to populate the area. You can't catch nits; they have to be laid by live lice.

Since lice can live for up to a day off of the human head, it's theoretically possible to get infested if your hair makes contact with items such as hats, combs, or brushes if they were used recently by an infested person. However, this is less likely than human-to-human spread.

A healthy louse will rarely leave a healthy head (except to crawl onto another healthy head!), and lice found on combs are usually injured or dead.

Are lice more common in dirty conditions?

It's a myth that lice are a product of poor hygiene or poverty. Head lice are equal-opportunity parasites. They like clean hair as well as dirty hair and can flourish in even the wealthiest communities.

So, when lice are going around, it's no one child or family's fault. If your child has lice, chances are they're traveling through the neighborhood or school. And your child has probably unknowingly infected others.

Head lice are most common among preschool- and elementary school-age children and their families and caregivers. Some studies suggest that girls get head lice more often than boys. This may be because they have more head-to-head contact with each other and longer hair that provides more warmth and darkness (two things lice love).

Interestingly, lice are much less common among African Americans in the United States than among people of other races. This may be because lice claws have a tougher time grasping the shape and width of African American hair.

When you became a parent, you probably never imagined yourself hunting for lice in your child's hair. But that's just what you (or someone) will have to do if you suspect that your child is infested.

When the bad news comes from a school

The Paulding County Board of Education has a regulation in place regarding head lice (JGCCA-R):

1. Send the identified student to the office/clinic with a pass stating what was found (lice or nits).
2. If live lice are found the parent/guardian will be notified (if possible) by phone and written instructions will be provided on how to treat the problem. If only nits are found, the student will be allowed to return to class with written instructions to be given to the parent/guardian on how to treat the problem.
3. If live lice are found the parent/guardian will be asked to pick up the student if at all possible. If the parent/guardian is unable to pick up the student, the student will return to the classroom for the remainder of the day.
4. The parent/guardian will be notified that the student may return to school when they are free of live lice. Parents/Guardians are encouraged to bring proof of treatment such as a label from lice shampoo, proof of a non-chemical treatment, or a note from a physician, etc.
5. If the problem persists with a given student, the parent will be contacted to discuss the problem either by telephone or conference.
6. In the event of a third infestation of head lice during the school year, the child will be referred to the PCSD Social Worker for follow-up.

How to inspect your child's head

The sesame-seed-size creatures and their teeny-tiny eggs are quite hard to spot. To find out whether you need to take action, try the following two-to three-step process.

If you can't spot them via a visual inspection (step 2), try wet combing (step 3). A 2009 study in the Archives of Dermatology found that "wet-combing" accurately identified active head lice infestations in 90 percent of cases. In contrast, visual inspections accurately identified 29 percent.

You'll need **really good light** and a pair of **strong drugstore reading glasses** or a **magnifying glass** (unless you have the eyes of an eagle). If you move on to step three, you'll also need a **metal lice comb** and some **hair conditioner**.

Step 1: Look for the signs and symptoms of head lice

Your child may have one or more of these symptoms:

- A tickling feeling on the scalp
- A sensation that something is moving in the hair
- Itching caused by an allergic reaction to lice bites (kids may scratch or rub their scalp, especially around the back of the head or ears)
- Sores on the head caused by scratching
- Irritability

- Trouble sleeping (lice are more active in the dark)

Step 2: How to search for lice, stage one (dry hair)

1. Check your child's scalp.

Part the hair in various places and check the scalp behind the ears and at the nape of the neck. You may notice sores or a rash where your child has been scratching.

2. Look for movement in the hair.

You're not likely to see the [lice themselves](#). They're very small, move quickly, and avoid light, so they're difficult to spot.

3. Look for lice eggs, known as nits.

These tiny white or yellowish tear drop-shaped sacs are attached to the hair near the scalp (within a quarter inch if they haven't yet hatched). Nits may be easier to feel than to see: They'll feel like grains of sand.

4. Make sure the "nits" you see are really nits.

Nits are often hard to distinguish from dandruff or flakes of hair products. The difference is that nits stick to the hair like glue while dandruff and other flakes are easily removed from the hair shaft.

5. Make sure the nits you find are still alive.

If the only nits you find are more than a quarter inch from the scalp, they may have already hatched and your child may no longer be infested. (Nits can only hatch in the warmth right next to the scalp. After they hatch, the empty egg remains attached to the hair and grows farther and farther from the scalp.) Only viable nits – those very close to the scalp – or live lice are proof of a current infestation.

Step 3: How to search for lice, stage two (wet hair)

You'll need to go on to this step if you can't tell whether there's an infestation by looking at your child's hair and feeling it, the way you did in step 2. Studies have found that a [lice comb](#) is the best tool for finding live lice. (A flea comb may also work.) The teeth on a regular comb are too far apart to nab the tiny lice.

1. Wet your child's hair.
2. Pour on lots of conditioner.
3. Comb the hair out in sections, from the roots to the ends, with a lice comb.
4. If there are lice in your child's hair, you should see them on the comb.

(Shaking the comb out into a plastic bowl after every swipe can help you see them better.)

If you determine that your child does have lice, check the other kids and adults in your house. You'll need to treat everyone to effectively rid your family of lice. If you follow these steps and you're still not sure, have your child checked by a doctor or at a [lice salon](#).

IF YOU HAVE MORE QUESTIONS REGARDING LICE, VISIT HEADLICE.ORG.

