

Oakland County Health Department

Head Lice

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny insects 1/8" long that live on the human head. Color varies from light to dark tan. They do not jump or fly, but crawl from hair to hair and feed on blood from scalp bites.

Who can get head lice?

Anyone can get head lice regardless of their personal hygiene practices. Head lice is most common in preschool, elementary school age children, and household members of infected individuals.

What are the signs & symptoms?

- Tickling feeling in the hair.
- An itchy head, especially around the ears and back of the neck.
- Lice eggs are smaller than sesame seeds and are called "nits." Unlike dandruff and other matter, nits are tightly attached to the hair shaft, often close to the scalp. Nits can vary in color including white, gray, yellow, tan or brown.
- Nits can be found on any hair and hatch in 8-9 days.
- Adult lice are about the size of a sesame seed and may or may not be seen on examination.

How do you get head lice?

Head lice can be passed from one person to another in a number of ways:

- Head to head contact is the most common way.
- Sharing items like combs, brushes, towels, bedding, hats, coats, scarfs, ribbons and barrettes.
- Placing heads on furniture, rugs, pillows, or car seats recently used by someone with lice.

How long is the person contagious?

Until lice and nits are destroyed.

Are there complications?

Skin infections may occur from scratching. Head lice do not spread illness or disease.

Is there a treatment for head lice?

Yes, there are several prescription and over-the-counter head lice products available through your healthcare provider or drugstore. Oakland County Health Division does not endorse any specific brand or product.

Treatment Steps

- Wash hair with a cleansing shampoo that does not have conditioners, fruit, vegetables or protein added.
- Apply lice treatment according to package directions (do not use in shower or bathtub).

- Rinse out lice product (do not shampoo hair).
- Do not apply conditioners, gels, hair sprays or other hair products.
- Towel dry with a clean towel (not the one used before treatment).
- Remove all nits using nit comb, fingernails or by pulling from strands of hair. Put removed nits directly in a trash container.
- For most treatment products, a second treatment is required in 7—10 days to kill newly hatched lice.
- Follow product directions.
- Check each family member's head daily for 14 days, and re-treat if lice or nits are found (include all households where infected person has slept in the previous 2 days).
- Call all people who have recently been in contact with the infested person: school, babysitter, latchkey, friends and relatives.
- Swimming or washing the hair within 1-2 days after lice treatment may make some treatments less effective.
- Seek the advice of your healthcare provider or contact Oakland County Health Division.

How do I avoid head lice?

- Do not share combs, brushes, bandanas, ribbons, barrettes, hair ties, hats, caps, scarves, headsets, towels or any other personal headgear.
- Do not try on other people's hats (even in department stores).
- Hang coats separately and place hats and scarves inside coat or jacket sleeves.
- Clean or disinfect shared headgear (such as helmets) with Lysol or rubbing alcohol before it is used by others.
- Regularly check your child's head for lice.
- Avoid head-to-head contact at school (in gym, on the playground, etc.) and while playing at home with other children.
- Do not lie on bedding, pillows, carpets or upholstered furniture that have recently been used by someone with lice.

Cleaning Steps

- Remove hair from combs and brushes then soak in hot water (at least 130 degrees) for 5-10 minutes.
- Wash and dry all bedding (sheets, pillow cases, blankets, mattress covers and bedspreads) at hot settings (130 degrees or more). Allow water to get hot between loads of laundry.
- Put pillows and non-washable bedding in hot dryer for twenty (20) minutes or seal in plastic bag for two (2) weeks. Put stuffed animals and dolls in a sealed plastic bag for two (2) weeks.
- Vacuum all mattresses before making the bed with clean linens.
- Vacuum all upholstered furniture, carpeting, throw pillows, seats in cars and car seats. Use of insecticides is not recommended on vehicle seats and child safety seats. After use, place vacuum bag in garbage bag and tie tightly. Use a new vacuum bag for each cleaning.
- Fold clean clothes and put them away.
- Take non-washable clothes to the cleaners, put in a hot dryer for twenty (20) minutes or seal in a plastic bag for two (2) weeks.