

# HEAD LICE: THE FACTS

PA Department of Health  
1-877-PA HEALTH  
[www.health.state.pa.us](http://www.health.state.pa.us)

## What are Head Lice?

Head lice are tiny wingless insects that live on the head and scalp of people, especially children. They are 1/16 to 1/8 inch in length which is about the size of a sesame seed and vary in color from tan to grey/white.



Picture is enlarged for visibility of head lice. Image courtesy of the National Pediculosis Association, [www.headlice.org](http://www.headlice.org).

## Remember These Key Points:

- \* Anyone can get head lice
- \* Lice require blood to live
- \* Off the scalp, head lice rarely survive beyond two days
- \* Lice crawl very quickly
- \* Lice **do not** jump, fly or hop
- \* Lice is spread through direct contact mainly head to head contact
- \* Sharing combs, brushes, hats, barrettes, etc. can also spread lice
- \* Pets **cannot** get or spread human head lice
- \* Lice is a nuisance but **not** a health hazard



Actual size of the three lice forms compared to a penny. (CDC Photo)

## What are Nits?

Nits are lice eggs that are very tiny and difficult to see. They vary in color from yellowish-brown to pearly white and are teardrop shaped.



Picture is enlarged for visibility of nits compared to a pin head. Image courtesy of the National Pediculosis Association, [www.headlice.org](http://www.headlice.org)

### Additional Key Details about Nits:

\*Nits are firmly attached to the hair shaft close to the scalp, at the back of the head, and behind the ears with a waterproof glue-like substance.



\*The glue-like substance is so strong that the nits **cannot** be washed or flicked off with a fingernail

\*Nits hatch in 7-10 days and become adult lice in 9-12 days

\*As long as nits remain alive, head lice can spread

\***Nits must be removed daily**

### Steps to Treat Head Lice:

1. Check every member of the family for live lice and nits.
2. Treat family member who have head lice with a lice-killing product. Products are available at stores that carry hair care products. Ask the pharmacist if you need help in choosing or locating a product.
3. It is important to **follow the label directions** on the product **EXACTLY**.
4. Remove all lice and nits with either a lice comb or by picking them out.
5. Check hair everyday for at least 14 days for any missed lice and nits and remove if present.
6. Repeat treatment **according to package directions**, usually in 7-10 days.
7. Remind individuals **not to share** combs, hair barrettes, hats, scarves, helmets, or coats with other people.
8. If problems with lice persist, **call** your health care provider.

### What are the Symptoms:

- \*Itching
- \*Tickling feeling of something crawling in the hair
- \*Scratch marks or red bite marks behind ears or back of the neck
- \*Irritability and sleeplessness because head lice are active at night

### Steps to Clean the Home:

1. Wash **all** pillow, bed sheets, stuffed animals and clothing that the individual has used in hot water (at least 130°).
2. Place items in the dryer at the hottest setting for at least 20 minutes.
3. Dry clean items that cannot be washed.
4. Place items that **cannot be cleaned or run through the dryer** (i.e. stuffed animals and toys) in a tightly sealed plastic bag for 10-14 days.
5. Wash **all** hair care items (combs, brushes, hair clips, etc.) in hot water (130°) for 20 minutes.
6. Vacuum the **entire** house including rugs, furniture, floors, mattresses, and car including car seats to get rid of any hairs that may viable nits attached.
7. After **all individuals** with head lice have been treated and the **entire** house has been cleaned, then bedding can be reapplied to the beds.
8. Sprays **should not** be used in the home. Sprays can be toxic. They are not safe for humans or the environment. Sprays can also be a trigger for individuals with breathing conditions such as asthma.

### Resources

Centers for Disease Control (<http://www.cdc.gov/lice/head/treatment.html>)

Harvard School of Public Health (<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html>)

National Pediculosis Association ([www.headlice.org](http://www.headlice.org))