

Head Lice



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Communicable Disease Division
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Date:

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Your child may have recently been exposed to **lice**. Lice are small, tan-colored insects about the size of a sesame seed that lay tiny, gray/white eggs (nits) in the hair. Lice do not cause or spread disease. Head lice occur in all socioeconomic groups and do not represent poor hygiene.

What are the symptoms of lice?

Symptoms include itching and scratching on the scalp, behind and around ears, and neck. Eggs (nits) may be glued to the hair shaft about 3 to 4 mm from the scalp. Sometimes the small, tan-colored insects can be seen and/or felt moving in the hair.

How are lice spread?

Lice are spread by direct contact with the hair or headgear of a person infested with lice. Lice can only spread by crawling; they do not fly or jump. They may also spread when a person shares items such as combs, brushes, hats, blankets, or pillows with another person with lice. Lice can live only 1 to 2 days away from the scalp.

How is lice diagnosed and treated?

By carefully inspecting hair with a bright light and a magnifying glass, lice and nits can be identified. There are a variety of treatments for lice. Pesticides that kill lice and most eggs are available. These products are available in drug and grocery stores. It is extremely important to follow the directions on the box and not overuse these chemicals. Suggested remedies using common household products (e.g., salad oils, mayonnaise, Vaseline) have **not** been shown to be effective. ***It is more important to comb the hair with a special nit comb to remove lice and nits daily for 2–3 weeks.***

How do you control the spread?

Articles that may have been exposed to lice or nits should be laundered in a washer and/or dryer with a temperature of at least 130° F. Using hot water in a washer and drying on the hot setting kills lice in bedding and clothing. Dry cleaning clothing and bedding is also effective. Toys, stuffed animals, bedding, other fabrics and upholstered furniture that cannot be laundered can be sealed in a plastic bag for at least 10 days; vacuum floors, carpets, mattresses and furniture. Do not share hats, combs, pillows or other personal items.

How do I get more information?

For more information about lice, contact your healthcare provider or Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department at (253) 798-6410 and press "0".