

## **Head Lice: Myths, Facts and How to Get Rid of Them!**

September is National Head Lice Prevention Month. School is back in session, and no doubt, parents and schools might be dealing with head lice. There is a lot of misinformation about these tiny, yet highly contagious annoyances. It's important for people to have factual information, and learn how to most effectively deal with them.

Head lice are tiny, wingless parasites in the Louse family. They are about the same size as a sesame seed. They feed on blood, but are fairly harmless. They do not transmit infections, and the major symptom of an infestation is itching. Infections may arise from scratching if there are bacteria or dirt under fingernails. People get head lice from coming in contact with someone who is already infected – by touching heads, or sharing hats or helmets. It is possible to get lice from bedding, shared clothing, towels or other fabric surfaces.

There is a lot of misinformation about lice. Some things to keep in mind: Head Lice do not jump from person to person, as they do not have the legs required for jumping. Head Lice are great crawlers and can move easily from one person to another if heads are touching.

Anyone can get lice, regardless of age, race, how often you bathe or how much money you make. No one is immune.

Dogs, cats and other animals do not transmit head lice. Head lice do not get into pet fur and wait for a human host to come along.

Swimming pools do not transmit lice. They cannot swim. When your hair gets wet, they hang on. In addition, toilet seats do not transmit lice, or their close cousins; crabs. Lice and crabs cannot hold onto anything other than hair.

Adult female lice can lay up to 100 eggs in her 30 day lifetime. Each egg, or nit, contains a single nymph (baby lice.) Nits are probably easier to spot than lice, and are often found at the base of the hairs behind the ears and at the back of the neck. They are yellow, tan or brown and look a lot like dandruff, but cannot be shaken off. Once a nymph hatches in 8 – 14 days the nit will turn white.

The most effective way to get rid of lice is to buy an over the counter head lice shampoo. All drug, grocery and discount stores carry several varieties, from generic to name brands. They can usually be found in the hair care section of the store. Parents must follow directions on the box carefully, and everyone in the home must be treated. Usually the shampoo is left on the hair for ten minutes and rinsed off. A fine-toothed comb is included in most packaging. The hair must be combed thoroughly to remove any nits and dead lice. The comb should be rinsed several times while using. You absolutely must repeat the treatment in seven to ten days. New lice will have hatched and you want to kill them off before they are mature enough to lay new nits. People who are allergic to ragweed, pregnant or breast-feeding women, kids under the age of two, people with

HIV/AIDS or other immunosuppressive disorders, or those who are on chemotherapy should talk with their doctor before using any over-the-counter lice treatment. Never apply these shampoos to the eyelashes, however. Do not use a hairdryer after applying shampoos as some of the ingredients may be flammable when exposed to high, direct heat.

All clothing and bedding that the family has used for the past seven days should be washed in warm or hot water and put in a dryer, on high, for at least 20 minutes. If you have items that cannot be washed in hot water or put in the dryer, simply seal them up in a garbage bag for a week. Lice will die within 4 days off a human host.

Vacuuming mattresses and furniture is also a good idea. You do not need to buy a pesticide spray for your furniture. They rarely work and put a lot of toxins in your home.

Some parents want to use a natural remedy for lice. At this time there are no proven effective natural treatments. There are a lot of products sold on the internet that are called “natural.” Beware, they generally do not work, and can be far more toxic than shampoos you buy in the store. If you really don’t want to use a chemical treatment, some people have been successful in removing lice by simply combing their hair with a fine-toothed comb every day, for 20 minutes for at least two weeks. It takes much longer to treat lice this way, and success is not guaranteed.

Many people may have great advice on how to get rid of lice, based on old home remedies. Many of these are ineffective, and not safe. You should never put kerosene or gasoline on someone’s head! Lysol does not kill lice & should not be sprayed on the skin. Commercial pesticides like Raid cannot be used; they are far too strong. Mosquito repellants will not work. Shaving the head is not necessary, and does not get rid of lice, it just makes it easier to see them. Soaking your head in water, oils or vinegar also does not hurt lice. Lastly, you should never apply a lice treatment and wrap your head in plastic or a shower cap to “sit” overnight. It won’t work and could make you very, very sick.

If you or your child gets lice, remember, you’re in good company. Millions of kids will get them this school year, and chances are your friends and neighbors have dealt with them in the past. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, just a fact of life! Lice are very annoying, but they are relatively easy to get rid of if you have the patience.

For more information visit the Kids Health website at <http://kidshealth.org/parent/infections/common/lice.html>

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*REACH CNY (formerly the Family Ties Network, Inc.,) works to ensure access and support for the full range of quality, culturally-sensitive health and human services; to reduce teen pregnancies; and promote the health and well-being of individuals and families; through education and advocacy.*

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