

## What are Head Lice?

Head lice are insects that live and feed on the human scalp and lay their eggs by attaching them firmly to the hair. The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed and is brown to reddish brown. They can move quickly but cannot hop or fly. They are difficult to see because they move quickly away from light. An adult female may lay between 50-90 eggs. The eggs also known as nits, hatch in 7 days and grow to adulthood in about 2 weeks. Nits are about the size of (-) are oval in shape and are tan, brown, or white.

## Nits and Adult Lice

Louse at different stages of development  
(Lice is plural for louse)



- <———— Adult louse
- <———— Baby louse (nymph)
- <———— Nit (egg) on a hair strand

## How is Head Lice Spread?

Head lice crawl and most of the time are spread by head to head contact, such as when kids are playing together, or sleeping over in another house. It is possible but less likely that they are spread by using pillows, combs, hats or clothes etc. recently used by someone with head lice.

## When should I check for Head Lice?

Check hair if child is complaining of itchy head/scalp or if you see anything resembling dandruff, take a closer look. After one has had head lice for a few weeks, the head will become very itchy in most cases but not all. Head checks should be done at home as weekly routine for pre-school and school-age children.

## How do I check for Head Lice?

Under bright lighting check the hair close to the scalp for either the insects or their nits. Check especially the area at the front of the head, around the ears and the nape of the neck. You may not actually see the insects, as they hide from light and from being disturbed, but the nits or eggs do not move. Nits can be distinguished from dandruff in that they are firmly attached to the shaft of hair and cannot be removed by blowing or flicking with a fingernail.

If you check for head lice often at home and they are found on your child, you can begin treatment early and save time, effort and money in getting rid of them.

# MYTHS AND FACTS

## Head Lice Common Myths and Facts

**Myth:** Head lice carry disease

**Fact:** Lice neither carry nor transmit disease. Lice are a nuisance to humans, not a health hazard. Lice infestations are not a medical condition or disease but have become a social disease.

**Myth:** Lice jump or fly from one head to another.

**Fact:** Lice have 6 legs with claws for grasping hair. They do not have wings so cannot fly. The claws prevent jumping. Lice crawl, grasp hair and swing from hair to hair like a trapeze artist.

**Myth:** Lice are easily transmitted in the school setting.

**Fact:** Close hair-to-hair contact is necessary to transfer lice to a new head. Bed sharing is the most common situation for the transference of lice. In order for an infestation to occur a male and a female louse or an inseminated female must be acquired. Scientific sources agree that the school is not a significant source of head lice infestation.

**Myth:** An unclean house, dirty or long hair, and low socioeconomic status contribute to lice infestations.

**Fact:** Lice have no preference for any particular group, dirty or clean, long or short hair. As long as there is a warm, moist scalp, and a blood supply as a food source, it's a good home for lice. That means everyone's scalp is a potential home for lice.

**Myth:** Lice can be transferred by inanimate objects such as hats, combs, coats hanging in the same place, furniture, headphones, or helmets.

**Fact:** The life cycle of a louse must be completed on a head. Lice die very quickly off the head. Lice must suck blood every six hours or they will dehydrate and die. Eggs (nits) need the warmth and moisture of the scalp. Lice need the warmth, moisture and food source of the scalp to live and breed. Healthy lice do not leave healthy heads. Lice are unable to grasp anything but human hair. They cannot grasp objects such as helmets or headphones. The fibers of hats, coats or furniture and the teeth of a brush or comb are too large for the lice to grasp.

Researchers have tried to transfer lice by using inanimate objects but have not had success. Hats worn by 1000 students were examined and no head lice were found on the hats even though many lice were found on the children's heads.

**Myth:** Lice can be picked up off of carpets.

**Fact:** Lice that fall off the scalp are usually damaged and not viable. Lice cannot grasp the carpet fibers and die without a blood source. In one study 118 carpeted classrooms were examined. No live lice or eggs were found, even though 14,563 lice were found on the heads of students in these classrooms.

**Myth:** Itching is often a sign of lice.

**Fact:** Itching due to lice is a result of the saliva that mixes with the blood as the lice feed on the scalp. This saliva is what causes the itching sensation but may not develop for 4-6 weeks when the host develops sensitivity to the saliva. Itching may also result after treatment with a lice shampoo and is a result of the irritation of the shampoo and not a sign of treatment failure.