

# Head Lice and Children



Photo of nit attached to hair and two lice. The nymph or newly hatched louse is much smaller than the adult louse. Photo retrieved from [http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/lice/factsheet\\_head\\_lice.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/lice/factsheet_head_lice.htm) on April 11, 2007

This letter is a quick summary of what parents need to know about head lice. Additional information on the website as well. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

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## About Head Lice:

- Head lice are small insects with six legs and no wings. They can't jump, hop or fly.
- Head lice are light brown in color.
- Their front legs pinch to hold onto the hair.
  - Normal bathing, shampooing or brushing hair does not easily remove them from the hair.
  - Lice that fall off a person's head are at the end of their life cycle and dying.
- Lice do not cause any diseases but can cause itching which makes a person scratch.
- People may have head lice for 2-3 weeks before they notice itching, lice or eggs .
- Adult lice lay eggs which are called nits.
  - The nits are glued onto individual hairs close to the scalp so nits do not "fall off."
  - Most nits found farther than approximately ¼ inch from the scalp are not "viable" which means they won't hatch or are empty shells.
  - Nits can vary in color from person to person which can make it harder to see the nits.

## How do people get head lice?

- By head to head contact.
  - Lice need to live on someone's head. They don't crawl off one person to find another person's head unless there is head to head contact between the two people, especially sustained contact.
- Sharing combs and hats could spread lice, but are much less likely to than head to head contact. However, it's still best to not share hats, hair brushes or combs.
- The more chance there is of head to head contact, the more chance there is of spread. Examples include family members or friends for sleepovers especially if sharing a bed.

## Who gave my child head lice?

- According to Dr. Pollack, a nationally recognized expert, “Head lice are acquired from other infested people..... The offending lice came from some other person, but it is not currently possible to determine the identity of the donor. Parents are encouraged to focus their energies on *education* and *treatment*....Parents are likely to benefit more by ensuring all children and adults in (their) home are inspected and treated as appropriate.”

## What to do if you think you or your child has head lice:

- Verify that your child really has lice. This is done by seeing live lice or finding nits within ¼ inch of the scalp. You may ask the school nurse to help verify.
- Consider treating with an over the counter lice “shampoo” such as Nix®.
  - Follow directions carefully.
  - Do NOT treat everyone in the family “just in case”; only treat those who have head lice.
  - Re-treat in 7-10 days per package directions. This is to kill any newly hatched lice before they are mature enough to lay more nits as shampoos may not kill all the original nits.
- Comb hair frequently with a louse comb, frequently found in the treatment shampoo box.
  - This combing can help find and remove any recently hatched lice before they are mature enough to lay more nits.
  - Comb every 2-3 days, even if medicated shampoo was used, for at least 2 weeks or for 2 weeks after any live lice are seen.
  - Dampen hair or wet comb on each pass. This helps prevent static electricity so that lice will stay on comb where you will see them.
- Wash or vacuum items that have been in contact with your child’s head in the last 24-48 hours.
  - This may include combs, brushes, bed linens or carpets.
  - Head lice can’t live off of a head for over 48 hours.
  - Never use any lice sprays in your home; buildings do not get head lice, people do. Using sprays only adds expense and unneeded exposure to chemicals.
- Let parents of your child’s close friends you discovered lice, especially if they have had sleepovers and activities where head to head contact was likely.
- Call the school nurse if you have questions or need confirmation of your child having head lice.
- Consider calling your health care provider for a prescription treatment only if you feel you followed all directions on the over the counter shampoo and the lice were not effectively killed. The prescription treatment may be expensive.

**Additional information** may be obtained from the district website: [www.mcpsmt.org](http://www.mcpsmt.org), “student services” tab⇒ “health services” ⇒ “head lice”.

### Resources:

1. Pontius, D. (2014). Demystifying pediculosis: school nurses taking the lead. *Pediatric Nursing*, 40 (5), 226-235.
2. Pollack, Richard. (2014). From whom did my child acquire head lice. Retrieved from <https://identify.us.com/idmybug/head-lice/head-lice-FAQS/from-whom-did-acquire.html>