



# Sarpy/Cass Department of Health & Wellness

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## FACT SHEET

### Head Lice

Head lice are parasites which infest hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes, armpits and pubic areas. They are found worldwide and are common in daycares, schools and institutions everywhere. <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/>

**Cause:** The louse, a small, flat wingless insect, responsible for human head lice is *Pediculus humanus capitis* (head). Two other types of lice are: *Pediculus corporis* (body) and *Phthirus pubis* (crab louse). The parasites are specific to humans and feed on small amounts of blood.

**Symptoms:** The major complaint of head lice infestation include:

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of the head louse.
- Irritability and difficulty sleeping; head lice are most active in the dark.
- Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected with bacteria found on the person's skin.

**Spread:** Lice move by crawling; they cannot hop or fly. Head lice infest the head and neck, and attach their eggs to the base of the hair shaft. Anyone who comes in head-to-head contact with someone who already has head lice is at greatest risk. Spread by contact with clothing (such as hats, scarves, or coats) or other personal items (such as combs, brushes, or towels) used by an infested person is uncommon. Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with getting head lice.

[https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/gen\\_info/faqs.html](https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/gen_info/faqs.html)

**Incubation:** The human head louse has a three stage life cycle: eggs/nits, nymphs, and adults.

1. Egg/Nit: Nits are lice eggs laid by the adult female head louse at the base of the hair shaft nearest the scalp. Nits are firmly attached to the hair shaft and are oval-shaped and very small (about the size of a knot in thread) and hard to see. Nits often appear yellow or white although live nits sometimes appear to be the same color as the hair of the infested person. Head lice nits usually take about 8–9 days to hatch. Eggs that are likely to hatch are usually located no more than ¼ inch from the base of the hair shaft. Nits located further than ¼ inch from

the base of hair shaft may very well be already hatched, non-viable nits, or empty nits or casings.

2. After seven to ten days, nymphs emerge from the eggs. A nymph looks like an adult head louse, but is smaller. To live, a nymph must feed on blood. Nymphs mature into adults about 9–12 days after hatching from the nit.
3. The fully grown and developed adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs, and is tan to grayish-white in color. Adult head lice may look darker in persons with dark hair than in persons with light hair. To survive, adult head lice must feed on blood. An adult head louse can live about 30 days on a person's head but will die within one or two days if it falls off a person. Adult female head lice are usually larger than males and can lay about six eggs each day.

**Contagious  
Period:**

Human head louse can be passed person-to-person for as long as the lice or egg remain alive.

**Precaution:**

In the United States, infestation with head lice is most common among pre-school children attending child care, elementary school children, and the household members of infested children.

**Diagnosis:**

By looking closely through the hair and scalp for nits, nymphs, or adults. If crawling lice are not seen, finding nits within a 1/4 inch of the scalp confirms that a person is infested and should be treated.

**Treatment:**

Several treatments (pediculocides) are available that are effective against head lice. The treatments include:

- 1% lindane (Kwell®), not recommended for pregnant or nursing women, infants and young children),
- pyrethrin liquid with piperonyl butoxide (RID®, A-200 Pyrinat®), and
- 1% permethrin creme rinse (Nix®).

Lindane is the only treatment that requires a prescription, but it does not offer an advantage over the other agents. Pyrethrin is a plant extract from chrysanthemums. Permethrin is a synthetic drug with a greater activity against head lice than pyrethrin.

Eggs/nits should be removed by applying a solution of equal parts of vinegar and water and then combing the hair with a fine-toothed comb that was dipped in vinegar. Combs and brushes should be soaked in a pediculicide for one hour. Bedding and clothing should be washed in hot water, dry cleaned, or dried with settings set at hot cycle to destroy eggs and lice.

**Prevention:**

Avoid direct and indirect contact with infested people. For children in a group setting, directly inspect for head lice regularly.

**Information for  
Schools:**

Schools and daycares: upon finding a child with head lice: exclude children **at the end of the program or day**; attempt to avoid activities that involve head to head contact, sharing of hair grooming items or headgear.

<https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/schools.html>