

What are lice?

Lice are small insects that live in the hairy parts of the body. The eggs (nits), larvae, or adult lice are visible if present on the head or body. Lice move by crawling, they cannot hop or fly. Lice feed on human blood by biting, which can result in severe itching.

Are there different types of lice?

Yes, there are three different types of lice that may infest humans.

- 1) Head lice are found on the scalp
- 2) Pubic lice (crabs) are found in the groin (pubic) area
- 3) Body lice can be found in clothing, especially along inside seams that touch the body.

This fact sheet specifically addresses head lice.

What are the symptoms of head lice infestation?

- “Tickling” or 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.

How long after head lice infestation will symptoms to start?

- People with head lice may not have any symptoms, especially if this is the first time they have had head lice. Itching is the most common symptom of head lice and is caused by an allergic reaction to louse bites.
- It may take four to six weeks for itching to appear the first time a person has head lice.

Where on the head and scalp are head lice most commonly found?

- Head lice and head lice nits are found almost exclusively on the scalp, particularly around and behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the head.
- Head lice or head lice nits sometimes are found on the eyelashes or eyebrows but this is uncommon.
- Head lice hold tightly to hair with hook-like claws at the end of each of their six legs; head lice nits are cemented firmly to the hair shaft and can be difficult to remove.

How are head lice spread?

- Head-to-head contact with an already infested person is the most common way to get head lice.
 - Head-to-head contact is common during play at school, at home, and elsewhere (sports activities, playground, slumber parties, camp).
- Rarely, head lice are spread by sharing clothing or belongings onto which lice or nits may have crawled or fallen. Examples include:
 - sharing clothing (hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms) or articles (hair ribbons, barrettes, combs, brushes, towels, stuffed animals) recently worn or used by an infested person;
 - or lying on a bed, couch, pillow, or carpet that has recently been in contact with an infested person. The risk of getting an infestation by a louse or nit that has fallen onto a carpet or furniture is very small.
- Dogs, cats, and other pets do not play a role in the spread of human lice.

How are head lice treated?

- The Iowa Department of Public Health recommends a 14-day treatment process. For a brochure detailing treatment recommendations, please visit:
www.idph.state.ia.us/hcci/common/pdf/headlice_brochure.pdf

How effective are home remedies?

Never use kerosene, gasoline, or other dangerous substances. There is no proof that use of mayonnaise, vinegar, various types of vegetable oils, Crisco, or Vaseline are effective forms of treatment.

Do infected people need to be excluded from school, work, or child care?

- No. For more information on IDPH recommendations for lice in schools, please visit: www.idph.state.ia.us/hcci/common/pdf/headlice_brochure.pdf

What can be done to help prevent and control the spread of head lice?

- Avoid head-to-head (hair-to-hair) contact during play and other activities at home, school, and elsewhere (sports activities, playground, slumber parties, camp).
- Do not share clothing such as hats, scarves, coats, sports uniforms, hair ribbons, or barrettes
- Do not share combs, brushes, or towels. Disinfest combs and brushes used by an infested person by soaking them in hot water (at least 130°F) for 5-10 minutes
- Do not lie on beds, couches, pillows, carpets, or stuffed animals that have recently been in contact with an infested person.
- Do not use fumigant sprays or fogs; they are not necessary to control head lice and can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.
- Only ordinary house cleaning, vacuuming, and washing bedding and clothes in hot water are needed. No special efforts or sprays are needed to clean your home. Only dead or dying lice are found on clothing, bedding, or furniture.

To help control a head lice outbreak in a community, school, or camp, children can be taught to avoid activities that may spread head lice.