



ADAMS COUNTY HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES DEPARTMENT

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HEAD LICE

With colder weather, it is more likely hats, scarves, and other clothing are being shared which creates the perfect opportunity for a head lice outbreak. Anyone can get head lice, regardless of age, sex, race or personal hygiene. Because head lice are not known to cause disease, they are not considered a human health hazard. Head lice are an irritation and can be spread from person-to-person through direct head-to-head contact or indirect contact with lice-carrying objects such as combs, brushes, hats or scarves. Since nits, (louse eggs) are laid by the adult lice the chances of nits being spread from person-to-person are minimal. The lice feed on human blood which can cause severe itching. Bacterial infections can also occur from scratching. Head lice can also lead to embarrassment and isolation. With these reasons, removal and treatment of head lice is recommended.

Head lice are tiny, about the size of a sesame seed, and tan to grayish-white in color. Head lice move quickly by crawling. They do not fly or jump. They don't like light which makes it a challenge to see the lice for proper identification. Adult females can lay up to 10 eggs per day. Eggs/nits are very tiny and are attached by a "glue" to the base of the hair shaft about 4 mm from the scalp. Eggs are easily camouflaged by pigment that matches the hair color. Empty egg sacks are easier to see as they appear white. These sacks may be a good sign head lice are on the person's head. Head lice may be present for up to four weeks before they are noticed. Itching usually begins at the base of the neck and behind the ears. Lice are often present for a period of time before they are noticed. Head lice and their eggs require body heat to survive. However, they are able to live away from the body up to 24 hours.

Head lice are often common among daycare, preschool and school-aged children. Parents should check their children regularly for head lice. If head lice are found, parents and older family members also should be checked. Head lice occur in all ages, not just children.

There are several medicated shampoos commonly used to treat head lice. Shampoos or cream rinses that contain 1% permethrin have the fastest killing time against adult lice and the highest

nit-killing capability. Permethrin has a lingering effect that will continue to kill nits for several days after the first application. While one application should kill lice and nits, some experts suggest a second treatment one week after the first. Shampoos that contain pyrethrin kill lice quickly but do not leave a lingering effect that will continue to kill nits, resulting in treatment that is not as good. Two applications of these types of shampoo 7-10 days apart are recommended to kill nits. There are other shampoos available by prescription only. Alternate treatment methods such as the use of tub butter or margarine, mayonnaise, Vaseline® and olive oil, designed to smother head lice and nits can be used for those persons for whom lice-killing medications have failed. It is not clear how effective these treatments are. Kerosene, gasoline and other flammable products should never be used to treat head lice. Avoid using powder to remove alternate treatments from the hair. Grease cutting shampoos or dish soap may be used to remove alternate treatment. Avoid wearing plastic wrap and shower caps when using lice-killing medication. Such devices should never be used on young children, and used with discretion on older children and adults when alternate treatments are used. Manual removal of nits with a nit comb, fingernails, or by cutting strands of hair that contain nits is the most important step. You must remove nits following treatment in order to be sure they do not hatch. To aid in the removal of nits, hair can be soaked in a 3% to 5% white vinegar solution followed by application of a damp towel soaked in the same solution for 30-60 minutes before attempting nit removal. Shaving the head is not recommended as this may traumatize the person.

Wash any clothing, bedding, hats or stuffed animals that the person has had close contact with in the two days prior to finding lice in hot water (>130 degrees) and machine dry on the hottest setting for 20 minutes. Floors, furniture, and pillows should be vacuumed. Discard the vacuum bag when done. Place brushes and combs in hot water (>130 degrees), Lysol, or lice-killing chemicals for 1 hour. Other articles may be dry cleaned or sealed in plastic bags for at least 10 days to destroy lice and eggs. Use of insecticides and environmental sprays is not recommended.

If you or your child get head lice, begin treatment immediately, check others in the home for lice or nits, and clean your home in order to limit the chance of reinfection. Remember to avoid direct head-to-head contact with others and never share combs, brushes, hair barrettes, hats or bedding to stop the spread of head lice.

For more information, check out the following:

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p4/p42078.pdf>

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

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/135/5/e1355.full.pdf>

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