

Managing Head Lice At Home

Head lice are a nuisance. They do not spread disease and are not a sign of poor cleanliness. Anyone can get head lice, and they are much easier to treat if caught early.

Families are responsible for finding and treating head lice within their household. The information below provides evidence-based information to help manage head lice at home.

What Are Head Lice?

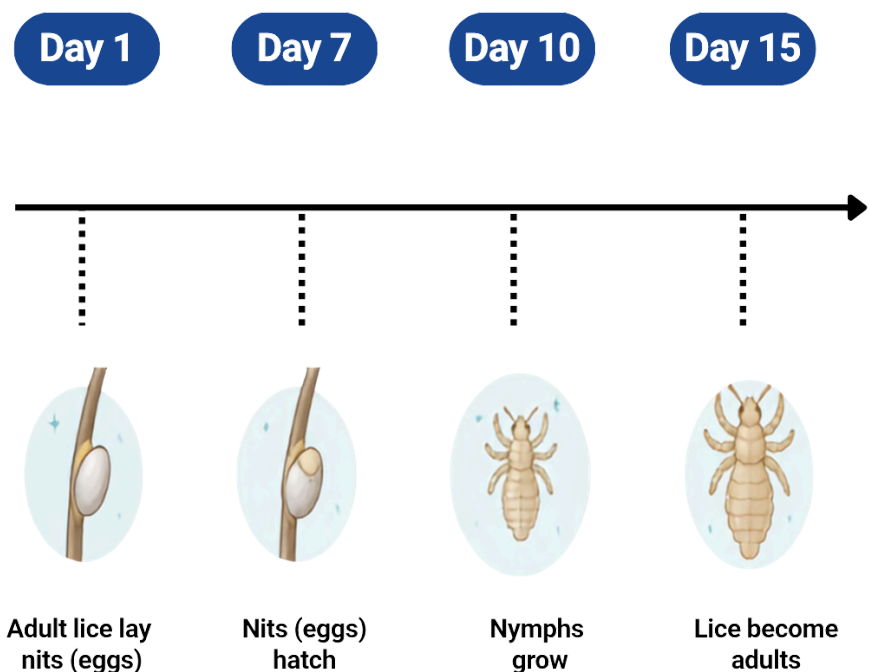
Head lice are tiny wingless insects that live on the scalp of humans. They feed on human blood. It is important to know the lifecycle of a louse to understand how to manage and treat them.

Understanding the life cycle helps break the cycle. **Check, treat, and repeat. Be nit picky!**

NITS are head lice eggs. Nits stick to the hair, close to the scalp (within 6mm) and are about the size of a grain of salt. They are usually yellow to white but can also be gray, brown, or clear. Nits may look like dandruff, but they cannot be easily removed from the hair. Nits take 7 to 10 days to hatch.

A **NYMPH** is about the size of a pinhead and looks like a grain of sand on the scalp. The nymph is released from the nit after 7 to 10 days and grow to be adults anywhere from 9 to 15 days after hatching.

The **ADULT** louse is about the size of a sesame seed and moves quickly. They are usually tan to grayish-white, but can be dark brownish. In dark hair, the adult louse will appear darker. Adult lice can live up to 30 days on a person’s head. The louse will die within 1 to 2 days without feeding.



How are Head Lice Spread?



- Head lice **cannot jump or fly**.
- The lice can crawl from one head to another anytime there is head-to-head contact for at least 30 seconds, e.g., children playing, taking group selfies, and sleepovers.
- Sharing items like combs, brushes, headbands, and hats may also spread lice.

Ways to Reduce the Spread of Head Lice

Anyone can get head lice. It does not mean that the person is unclean, has little money, or that a child is not receiving the proper care.

Checking is the only way to find head lice. Check for head lice every week. A person could have head lice and not have any itching or scratching. If they do feel itching, it will most likely occur in the area around the ears and the back of the neck at the hairline.

Check your child's head:

- weekly
- after every sleepover
- every day during lice outbreaks at school or in the community

Other ways to reduce spread:

- Keep long hair tied back or braided.
- Teach the whole family not to share personal items that are used on the head, such as hats, helmets, hair accessories, and headphones.
- Teach the whole family to put their hats and scarves in their coat sleeves or backpacks when they are hanging these items in a locker, dressing room, or closet.

Although many products claim to prevent head lice infestations, there are currently no products approved in Canada for the prevention of head lice.

How to Check for Head Lice

Head lice are tiny and can move very quickly. You may only see nits when you check for head lice. There are 2 options for checking for head lice:

Inspection

What you need:

- bright light
- hair clips
- regular comb
- white tissues
- head lice comb,* available at any drug store
- bag for garbage
- magnifying glass (optional)

*The head lice comb may not be suitable for all hair types, as hair types are not usually addressed in product inserts. A head lice comb should not be used with hair types with a high amount of curl, kink, or twist as the hair is more susceptible to breakage.

1. Untangle dry hair with a regular brush or comb.
2. Section the hair with the hair clips. Start with a section at the back of the head.
3. Using a head lice comb, place the teeth of the comb flat against the scalp.
4. Comb the hair from the roots through to the tips.
5. Wipe the comb on the tissue after each stroke. In bright light, check the tissue for head lice. A magnifying glass may help.
6. You may see eggs/nits in the hair.
7. Comb each section twice until you have combed the whole head.
8. Throw away all tissues using the bag. Tie it tightly and throw it out with regular household garbage.
9. Soak brush, combs, and hair clips in soapy hot water (just after boiling) for at least 30 seconds to ensure head lice are killed (this should be done by an adult). When the water has cooled, remove all debris from the combs and clips. Rinse.



Wet Combing

What you need:

- bright light
- hair clips
- regular comb
- white tissues
- white hair conditioner
- old toothbrush
- head lice comb,* available at any drug store
- bag for garbage
- magnifying glass (optional)

*The head lice comb may not be suitable for all hair types, as hair types are not usually addressed in product inserts. A head lice comb should not be used with hair types with a high amount of curl, kink, or twist as the hair is more susceptible to breakage.

1. Apply hair conditioner, covering the whole scalp and all hair from the roots to tips.
2. Section the hair with the hair clips.
3. Using a head lice comb, place the teeth of the comb flat against the scalp at the back of the head, and comb the hair from the roots to the tips.
4. Wipe the comb on the tissue after each stroke. In bright light, check for lice. You may see eggs/nits in the hair.
5. Comb each section twice until you have combed the whole head. If the comb becomes clogged, use an old toothbrush to remove the debris.
6. Throw out all used tissues and toothbrush in the bag. Tie it tightly and throw out with the regular household garbage.
7. Soak brush, combs, and hair clips in soapy hot water (just after boiling) for at least 30 seconds to ensure head lice are killed (this should be done by an adult). When the water has cooled, remove all debris from the combs and clips. Rinse.



What to do if Head Lice or Nits are Found

If head lice are found during your check:

Treat immediately and according to product instructions if you find lice or nits within 6mm (pinky-finger width) of the scalp during your check. Nits found more than 6mm away from the scalp are usually hatched or are no longer alive.

Head lice spread easily. If one person in the household has lice, others may have it too. [Check everyone in the household on the same day.](#)

Apply a treatment method to members of the household [who have lice/nits](#), on the same day, and treat bedmates of those who have lice/nits as well.

To help reduce the spread, notify your child's school or community group that you have found head lice. Once treated, your child can continue to attend school or activities as usual.



How to Treat Head Lice

If you find lice during your check you will need to use a treatment. There are several types of approved products for head lice treatment available within Canada:

- Permethrin, e.g., Nix, Kwellada-P
- Pyrethrin, e.g., R&C Shampoo/Conditioner
- Resultz
- NYDA

Things to Consider When Choosing a Product for Treatment

Not all products are suitable for young children or pregnant women; **read the product label** to make sure it is safe for the person being treated.

Each product is used differently, so **carefully follow the instructions included with the product you are choosing.**

No available product will kill all nits. You will need to treat again in 7-10 days, to kill the lice that hatched from the nits since the first treatment.

After the application of any product nits will still be present. These will need to be removed by hand.

General Product Information

Apply an approved treatment product twice, with the second application 7 to 10 days after the first. Carefully follow the instructions included with the product you are choosing.

The scalp may be itchy after treatment; this does not mean the treatment did not work.

Minimize contact with skin beyond the scalp. Protect skin with towels and do not let your child sit in a bath to rise hair.



Removing Nits by Hand

After you have completed a treatment, [nits that are still present should be removed by hand](#). This method can also be used for children 6 months and younger, for those who are less than 2 years (depending on the product used), those who are pregnant, or those with allergy to the products. [This method is very time-consuming](#) and may be a difficult process for a child. They may need to have several sittings versus one long session.

Removing Nits by Hand

What you need:

- bright light
- hair clips
- regular combs
- white tissues
- head lice comb,* available at any drug store
- bag for garbage
- magnifying glass (optional)

*The head lice comb may not be suitable for all hair types, as hair types are not usually addressed in product inserts. A head lice comb should not be used with hair types with a high amount of curl, kink, or twist as the hair is more susceptible to breakage.

Note: Do not use vinegar to help remove nits as it can reduce the effectiveness of some products.

The following steps need to be done [daily](#) during treatment:

1. Untangle hair with an ordinary comb or brush.
2. Section the hair with the hair clips.
3. Start with a section at the back of the head. Place the teeth of the head lice comb flat against the scalp.
4. In a well-lit area, inspect each hair for nits.
5. Remove nits by pulling each one off the strand of hair, you may have to use your fingernails.
6. Focus on removing those nits within 6 mm from the scalp. Nits found more than 6mm from the scalp are unlikely to hatch.
7. Wipe the lice comb on the tissue after each stroke of the hair.
8. Throw all used tissues into the bag. Tie tightly and throw out with regular household garbage.
9. Soak brush, combs, and hair clips in soapy hot water (just after boiling) for at least 30 seconds to ensure head lice are killed (this should be done by an adult). When the water has cooled, remove all debris from the combs and clips. Rinse.

Keys to Controlling Head Lice

- After the application of any product, eggs/nits will still be present, [remove these eggs/nits by hand](#).
- Make sure everyone is free of live lice and nits. Continue checking household members [at least once a week](#) after the second application is done.
- If you find live lice after the second application, then repeat the treatment using a different product (with a different ingredient). This means applying the product on one day and reapplying 7-10 days later. **NOTE:** Do not mix head lice products for use at the same time.
- If you continue to find live head lice after following these steps, contact your family physician, pharmacist, or public health nurse.

Has the product worked?

Check to see if the product has killed the lice

After using a product and following all the directions and timelines, look through the hair using [Inspection](#). You may not find any lice. If lice are found, observe for movement, and decide if the treatment worked or not.

The treatment **did not work** if:

- The lice are still moving (they may be slower).
- Start the steps again with a product which has a different ingredient.

The treatment **worked** if:

- The lice are not moving at all.

Remember to take a peek every week!



When Treatment Does Not Seem to Work

It is very frustrating when you are doing everything that is recommended, and nothing seems to work. Some possible reasons for this may include:

The treatment was not applied correctly.

[Apply the product according to product's directions.](#) The product must be applied to all hairs, from the roots to the tips, and remain on the hair for the time stated in the directions to kill the lice.

Applying the product only once.

Using any product only once will fail, as no available products kill all nits. Even if the live lice are killed or removed on the first treatment, the nits will continue to hatch. [Reapply the product 7- 10 days later,](#) following to the directions for the product.

Resistance to products.

Resistance is when the product used for treatment does not kill the head lice. You will not know if the head lice are resistant to the product you are using before you try it. The only way to know is to check for effectiveness after you have used it.

Head lice were picked up again.

This means that a case of head lice was successfully treated, but adult lice are found again. If no head lice or nits are found in the hair when checking daily for one week but are present when checking the following week, it is most likely that lice were picked up again.



Household Clean-up and Personal Belongings

When managing head lice at home, regular household cleaning is appropriate. Excessive cleaning, such as scrubbing the walls, is not necessary. Household sprays are not recommended and can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin. **Daily head checks and nit removal are more useful for the management of head lice.**

Items that are in contact with the head such as, brushes, hats, pillowcases, etc. need to be cleaned to get rid of any nits and lice. Household clean-up may include:



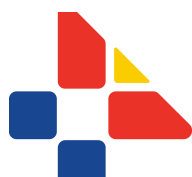
- Combs, brushes and hair accessories:
 - Soak in soapy hot water (just after boiling) for at least 30 seconds to ensure head lice are killed (this should be done by an adult). When the water has cooled, remove all debris from the combs and clips. Rinse.
- Hats, pillows and pajamas:
 - Wash in hot, soapy water and dry in a hot dryer for 15 minutes each day.
 - Dry clean anything that is not washable.
 - Iron items that are safe to iron.
- Toys and other items that can't be washed:
 - Place in a tightly sealed bag for two weeks.
 - Place in the freezer for at least 24 hours.
- Vacuum mattresses, furniture and car seats.
- Pets:
 - Animals do not carry or spread human head lice. No treatment is needed.

For More Information:

Please contact your local Public Health Nurse

Or

Visit the Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services' Health Information Website
[.hi.easternhealth.ca](https://hi.easternhealth.ca)



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