



INFECTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL

Head Lice (*Pediculosis capitus*) Patient Information

What are lice?

Lice are tiny insects that bite and feed on human blood. There are three different types of lice: head, body and pubic lice.

Where are head lice found?

Head lice live mainly on the hair of the head and may also be found in eyebrows and eyelashes. Some lice stay on clothing or other items that have been in contact with the head of the person who has head lice. Head lice can live up to 30 days on a human, but cannot live for more than 1-2 days off of a human.

Nits (eggs) are laid by the adult female and are cemented at the base of the hair close to the scalp. They are hard to see and are often confused for dandruff or hair spray droplets. They are 0.8 mm by 0.3 mm, oval and usually yellow to white. Eggs take about 1 week to hatch.

How do people get lice?

Lice move by crawling; they cannot hop or fly. You can get head lice if you:

- come in close contact with a person who has lice,
- touch the clothing or bedding of someone who has lice, or
- share hats, towels, brushes, or combs of someone who has had lice.

Head lice crawl from person to person by direct head to head contact. Head lice spread easily, particularly among school children, and are more common in close, overcrowded living conditions. Having head lice does NOT mean the person has poor hygiene or low social status.

How do lice make people sick?

Intense itching and rash, which is caused by an allergic reaction to bites from lice, are common symptoms of lice infestation. This leads to scratching which can cause sores and secondary bacterial infection of the skin. Head lice never carry or spread diseases.

What are the symptoms of lice infestation?

Lice can cause an allergic reaction that is very itchy. Small, red bumps may be found in the affected area which may become crusty and ooze after scratching.

Tiny white specks (eggs) that are hard to get off may be found on the bottom of each hair.

How are lice infestations treated?

Head lice treatment has to be applied exactly as directed. Some of the lice medications have to be applied twice, 7-10 days apart. The medicine will kill adult lice, but the eggs (nits) may remain in the hair. It is important to look for adult lice and nits (eggs) after each treatment to make sure all the eggs are removed. You should keep checking the hair every 2-3 days for at least 3 weeks.

Check for lice and nits close to the scalp using a bright light and a magnifying glass, if available.

	Lice	Nits (eggs)
Size	Size of a sesame seed, flat,	Size of a grain of sand, oval
Color	Grayish-brown color	Brownish color, when alive (whitish dead)
Location	Crawling on head	Glued to the hair, close to skin

Removal of the eggs can be done with a fine-toothed nit comb or fingernails. Pull the nits from the hair strands starting at the root and pulling right down to the tips. Wipe the nits on a tissue, place them in a closed garbage bag, and wash your hands and the comb with soap and water.

What does the Hospital do to prevent the spread of lice?

If you are found to have lice you may be moved to a private room, and you will be on contact precautions. You will receive treatment for the lice, and after the first treatment is completed, contact precautions may no longer be required. Before the treatment, you will be asked to stay in your room, however, you may still have visitors. We will ask your visitors to clean their hands when they enter and leave your room. Visitors and everyone entering your room to provide care will need to wear a gown and gloves.

What special precautions are needed for lice at home?

Check all close contacts, if one person in the family or household has lice it is possible others may also have lice. If you have received the treatment and notice live lice more than 48 hours later, contact your Doctor. Wash all clothing and bedding in hot water (at least 130°F, 55°C) then machine dry using hot cycle. Items that cannot be washed may be sprayed with a medicated spray that you can buy at a drug store. You can also seal items in plastic bags for 14 days to smother lice.

If you have questions about the information in this document, contact Queensway Carleton Hospital's Infection Prevention and Control at 613-721-2000, ext. 3777 or Ottawa Public Health: <https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/diseases.aspx>