

# Head Lice: A Real Head Scratcher

## Fact Sheet for Parents

Each year approximately 6 to 12 million children between the ages of 3 and 12 years of age are infested with head lice.<sup>1</sup> While the odds of your son or daughter developing head lice are relatively small, the following includes useful information on how to spot and treat this condition.



### What are head lice?

Head lice are small parasitic insects that survive by removing small amounts of blood from the scalp every few hours.<sup>1</sup> Generally found close to the scalp, primarily around the ears and at the back of the neck, the adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed and can be the color of your child's hair.<sup>1</sup> Eggs, or nits, are smaller and are silver in color.<sup>1</sup>

### What are the symptoms of head lice?

The most common symptom of head lice is itching caused by an allergic reaction to the louse saliva. There may be redness or sores caused by scratching. Your child may be irritable and experience sleeplessness.<sup>2</sup>

### How common are head lice?

About one in every 100 U.S. elementary school children will be infested with head lice in any given year.<sup>3</sup> Infestation can occur throughout the year, although a peak is generally experienced during summer and back-to-school time periods. Girls are more likely than boys to become infested because of sharing personal hair items.<sup>1</sup>

### How do you get head lice?

Lice are "equal opportunity" parasites. They infest all socioeconomic groups, races, genders and ages, but are more commonly found in children due to their close contact with each other.<sup>1</sup> While head lice are not considered an infectious disease, spread from one child to another can occur primarily through direct head to head contact or secondarily through the sharing of personal items such as hats, scarves, helmets, brushes, combs or pillows.<sup>1</sup> It is important for you to know that lice are not a sign of poor hygiene and they do not spread disease. If someone in your child's class at school develops head lice, there is no reason to panic and automatically assume that your child will "catch" head lice.

### How do I know if my child has head lice?

Diagnosis of head lice is made on the basis of symptoms and confirmed through the identification of a live louse on the head. If your child is scratching his or her head, and you see red bite marks, sores, lice or nits on their scalp, he or she should be examined by a medical professional.<sup>3</sup>

### How do I prevent head lice?

While preventing head lice entirely can be difficult, children should avoid head to head contact during lice outbreaks. Secondly, parents should discourage their children from sharing personal items such as hats, scarves, headbands, helmets, brushes, combs or pillows to decrease the likelihood of spread from one person to another. All recently worn clothing, hats, bedding, and towels used by anyone having lice or thought to be exposed to lice can be washed in hot water (130°) or dry cleaned. Personal care items such as combs, brushes and hair clips should also be washed in hot water. Toys such as stuffed animals can be placed in a hot dryer for 30 minutes or in a plastic bag for 2 weeks.<sup>4</sup>

### How can I treat head lice?

Treatments for head lice include:

- Over-the-Counter (OTC) products
- Prescription products
- Alternative therapies — natural and herbal. These products have not been proven effective and are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).<sup>5,6</sup>
- Nit picking (hair combing) with a fine-tooth comb is often used to remove the nits (eggs) from the hair. Combing takes time and patience. While it may remove the eggs or empty shells, alone, it is not considered an effective treatment for head lice.<sup>6</sup>

Many approved products are safe and effective but like all medical treatments, they must be used as directed by parents. Also, studies have shown that head lice are learning to outsmart many pesticides and are developing resistance to OTC pyrethrin and pyrethroid products, in much the same way that some bacteria have developed resistance to antibiotics.<sup>6</sup>

If a child is suspected of having head lice, he or she should be examined by a medical professional.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Hansen RC (September 2004). Overview: The State of Head Lice Management and Control. *Am J Manag Care*, 10, S260-S263. ■ 2. CDC Fact Sheet. <http://www.cdc.gov/lice>. Accessed April 12, 2010. ■ 3. Pollack RJ. The Role of the School in Battling Head Lice. *Our Children Magazine*. <http://www.pto.org/2151.htm>. Accessed April 10, 2010. ■ 4. CDC Headlice Treatment. <http://www.cdc.gov/lice>. Accessed April 12, 2010. ■ 5. Frankowski BL (September 2004). Overview: The State of Head Lice Management and Control. *Am J Manag Care*, 10, S269-272. ■ 6. Burkhart CG. Relationship of Treatment-Resistant Head Lice to the Safety and Efficacy of Pediculicides. *Mayo Clin Proc*. 2004;79:661-666.