

LICE FACTSHEET

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What are head lice?

Head lice are parasitic insects found on the head, eyebrows, and eyelashes of affected people. They are very common, affecting 6 – 12 million people worldwide each year. Head lice feed on blood several times a day and live close to the human scalp. Head lice are not known to spread disease.

Who is at risk for getting head lice?

A person with head lice is said to be infested. Head lice are spread through direct contact with an infested person's hair. Children attending day care, preschool, elementary school and their families are most often affected. Head-to-head contact with an infested person is the most likely way for lice to spread. It is uncommon for a person to get lice through contact with clothing (such as hats, scarves, coats) or other personal items (such as combs, brushes, or towels) used by an infested person. Personal hygiene or cleanliness at home or school has nothing to do with the spread of head lice.

What do head lice look like?

Lice appear different in three different forms:

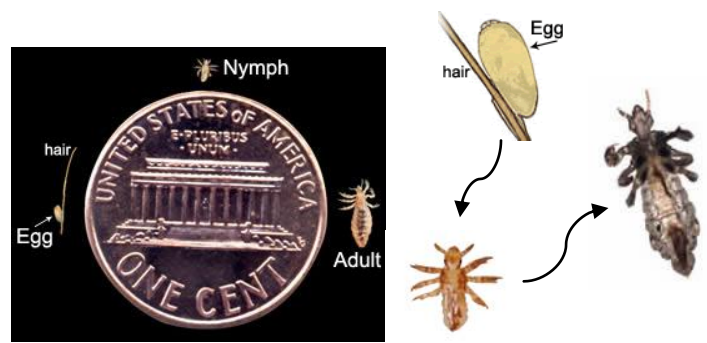
Nit: nits are lice eggs laid at the base of hair shafts to which they firmly attach. Eggs more than ¼ inch from the base of a hair shaft may be hatched.

Nymph: a nit hatches into a baby louse called a nymph, maturing to adults in 9 – 12 days.

Adult: fully grown head lice are about the size of a sesame seed, and are tan to grayish-white in color, but may look darker in persons with dark hair. Adult head lice live about 30 days, but die in 1 – 2 days if they fall off a person's head.

Where 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



Actual size of the three lice forms compared to a penny, illustration of nit attached to hair shaft, nymph and adult forms. (Modified from CDC photos)

the head. Head lice and nits are uncommonly found on eyelashes and eyebrows. Head lice hold tightly to hair with hook-like claws.

What are the signs and symptoms of head lice infestation?

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, due to an allergic reaction to the bites.
- Irritability and difficulty sleeping; head lice are most active in the dark.
- Sores on the head caused by scratching.

How is infestation with head lice diagnosed?

Diagnosis is made by finding a live nymph or adult louse on the scalp or hair of a person. Nymphs and adult lice are very small, move quickly, and avoid light, and are difficult to find. Use of a magnifying lens and a fine-toothed comb may be helpful to find live lice. Nits found firmly attached within a ¼ inch of base of the hair shafts strongly suggests, but does not confirm, that a person is infested and should be treated. If no live nymphs or adult lice are seen, and the only nits found are more than ¼-inch from the scalp, the infestation is probably old, not active, and does not need to be treated. If you are not sure if a person has head lice, the diagnosis should be made by their health care provider, local health department, or other trained person.

Want more information?

This information is from The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Additional information about Lice and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call (202) 442-5836.

