



The truth about head lice

Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer

Head lice have been annoying humans for at least 72,000 years, and, contrary to what many people think, they are not a sign of dirty, unkempt hair. And your children do not

get head lice because you are not a bad parent. Suddenly discovering head lice on your child's head need not be a complete disaster.

There is a lot of misinformation circulating about head lice but the best place start is with the "shame" factor surrounding an infestation.

Head lice can affect people of any income or social level. Although often associated with poor hygiene and poverty, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, head lice are commonly found in those with good hygiene and in upper and middle class conditions. You socioeconomic group neither protects you from an infestation, nor guarantees one.

Preventing the spread of head lice among children is extremely difficult. Because they commonly share hats, combs and other items, and are often in close proximity, head lice find the trip from one head to another short and easy.

A simple head lice infestation can have big social, emotional and financial implications for families. It can also significantly impact a child's school attendance, academic performance and self-esteem. It is unfortunate that in this day and age there are still those who shun people with head lice. How often have we heard otherwise intelligent, capable adults talk about the subject as if it were a dirty, preventable disease? (Don't answer that. It was rhetorical.)

Certainly, the itching from the infestation is annoying, and scratching can sometimes lead to skin infections, but head lice are not really a health problem. Because lice tend to live their lives very near the scalp, they do not care if your hair is long or short. People with long and short hair are equally likely to be infected.

So what exactly are head lice? A head louse is a small

parasite about the size of a sesame seed, usually tan or grey in color. They have six legs with small claws at the end of each leg. Each small claw is perfectly adapted to hold on tightly to the human hair shaft. They are wingless and do not hop, jump or fly.

Head lice only live, feed and breed on the human head. They do not live on animals or birds and do not survive more than three days off the head.

The life cycle of a head louse is about 21 to 30 days. The louse starts out as an egg or nit. The female lays her eggs and glues them tightly to the shaft of the hair close to the scalp. Nits are commonly found behind the ears and at the nape of the neck. They are usually light brown to tan in color and slightly fattened.

The nit hatches after seven to ten days and a head louse nymph emerges. It takes the nymph 7 to 10 days to mature before it can mate and begin laying more eggs. The mature head louse can live 7 to 10 days and if female, can lay up to 150 eggs in its lifetime. At adulthood, it is about the size of a sesame seed (3 mm long).

The louse clings to hairs with its claws and sucks blood from the scalp several times a day. Females lay five eggs each night (we have people counting so we know). The 'job' of a louse is to find an opportunity to get onto another head. They do this by clambering across a bridge of hair. It cannot jump. Eggs can survive for five days off the head so can be spread by shared hats or helmets, brushes, combs, earphones or bedding.

There are so many myths floating around about head lice. Unfortunately, they seem to have an ability to climb from one head to another, gripping tightly to the prejudice and lack of understanding in that head. Next time you hear about head lice, maybe you can educate the speaker (gently).

Children who contract head lice and their parents have no reason to be embarrassed or alarmed, but they already have enough dealing with the problem to not need misguided judgment. And by the way, you do not have to shave their heads to rid the lice.

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