The Facts of Lice

Lice are icky little bugs that live on the scalp and feed on blood. Unfortunately, many of us will have head lice at some point, and getting rid of them is a lot of work. Lice infestations happen in every corner of the world, from the richest homes to the poorest. They are almost as common as the common cold. Lice are passed from person to person through direct contact, or can pass through shared objects like hats, jackets, headphones, combs, pillows or car seats. Lice can only live on people, so you don't have to worry about washing your pets. There are many products and approaches to getting rid of lice. Let's talk a little about how lice live, and then we'll give you recommendations about getting rid of them.

The Life of Lice

Head lice are grey-white insects about the size of a sesame seed. They live for about a month, and the females lay eggs, commonly called nits, that are attached firmly to the base of a strand of hair. The eggs hatch in eight days, and the baby lice need eight days to grow up and become egg layers themselves. Lice can only survive for 2-3 days off of the scalp.

How to Know If Your Child Has Lice

The only way to know for sure your child really has lice is to see a moving louse on their head. It's much more common for someone to notice the white cases of the eggs (nits) attached to the hair. They will look like little white oval flakes attached to the hair strand. They are attached tightly and you will need to pull firmly along the hair to remove them, unlike dust or dandruff flakes, that you can just brush away. Remember, the eggs are laid at the base of the hair, so if they are found a few inches away from the scalp, that just means that lice were there in the past. The safest thing is to treat a person for lice if nits are found within a quarter inch of the scalp.

Getting Rid of Lice

We recommend starting with an over-the-counter lice lotion to kill the adult lice. The best one to start with is **Nix Crème Rinse (Permethrin 1% lotion)**, for children over age 2. Permethrin has advantages over other chemical lice treatments (pediculocides)—it has a low potential for toxic effects, and a relatively high cure rate. We recommend two applications, 9-10 days apart.

Here are instructions for Nix (they are also included with the product):

- First wash the hair with a non-conditioning shampoo (do not use a shampoo with conditioner, since it will decrease the effectiveness of Nix). Then towel-dry hair.
- Shake the bottle of Nix Crème Rinse well.
- Apply Nix Crème Rinse, thoroughly saturating the scalp and hair; also apply behind ears and at the back of the neck.
- Leave on for 10 minutes, and then rinse well with warm water and towel-dry hair.
- Repeat 9-10 days later. Do not use more than these two applications.

All of the shampoos and chemical lice treatments available are only good for killing the adult lice. They can't get rid of the eggs or the lice that will hatch out of them.

That's why the most important part of getting rid of lice is what comes next: combing out the eggs and young lice that hatch after the shampoo. You will need a good lice comb, a very fine comb that will often come with the lice shampoo. Metal combs are better than plastic. Get everyone who was infected together to comb out the nits. Wetting the hair and applying conditioner before combing makes the process easier. You need to comb every part of the head from scalp to tip of the hair. After each stroke of the comb dip it into a bowl of soapy water and wipe it with a paper towel to make sure the lice you remove are not put back onto the head with the next stroke. Combing is really important. There are lice treatment programs that rely entirely on combing and do not use any chemical treatments at all. A good description is found

at: www.microscopy-uk.org.uk/theliceprogram. You should meticulously comb to remove lice and nits every 2-3 days for at least 3 weeks.

While you are getting the lice out of your hair, you should also de-lice your home. Wash all of your bedding and towels and clothes that touch the head in hot water. Any clothes, pillows, stuffed animals, helmets, or any other items that cannot be washed should be placed in a tightly sealed plastic bag for two weeks. Remember, lice can only live for 2-3 days away from a human, so two weeks is more than enough to make sure none are alive on your stuff. You don't need to spray your home, but you should vacuum upholstery, carpets, mattresses and car seats. Brushes, combs and hair accessories should either be soaked in very hot water for 15 minutes or bagged for two weeks.

If your child has been sent home from school because of lice, the Centers for Disease Control says they should be able to return after one medicated shampoo and a first careful combing.

What if the lice don't go away?

Two possible reasons: an egg-laying louse survived our lotion and comb program; or your family got re-exposed to new lice. Talk to us if you are having trouble, or have any questions about the many lice products you may see advertised. While there are many things on sale to combat lice, and other treatments we can prescribe, remember that the most critical and most effective part of getting rid of lice is the combing and nit removal process. Work with your child's school or daycare to make sure everyone has been checked and treated for lice. This can be a really frustrating problem, but with the family and community working together, you should be able to defeat these bugs.

Sometimes the infestation is just more persistent than usual. We do have some other tricks up our sleeves, so come in and we'll make sure it is indeed lice that are persisting, and then suggest some further steps. But this is not the usual course.

Additional Information

If you would like to learn more, here are some additional, well-respected resources:

Information on lice treatment from the CDC (Centers for Disease Control):
In English: www.cdc.gov/lice/head/treatment.html
In Spanish: www.cdc.gov/lice/head/sp/tratamiento.html

FAQs (frequently asked questions) about lice treatment from the CDC:
In English: www.cdc.gov/lice/head/faqs_treat.html
In Spanish: www.cdc.gov/lice/head/sp/preguntas_tratamiento.html

Patient information from "Up To Date", an online medical reference:
www.uptodate.com/patients and enter "lice" in the search window