

Head Lice Frequently Asked Questions

Prepared by Beaver Unified School District (BDUSD) Health Services Supervisors

1. What are head lice?

The head louse (*Pediculus humanus capitis*) is a flat, wingless insect with three pairs of legs, each ending in a claw. They crawl from place to place and must pull themselves through strands of hair or fibers. Head lice feed on human blood and live on human hair. Head lice cannot fly or jump. Head lice cannot crawl on hard, smooth surfaces. Head lice do not live on pets.

Adult females lay 3-10 nits (eggs) a day and as many as 60-100 in their 30 day lifetime. Nits are attached to a hair with fixative cement secreted by the louse that makes them difficult to remove.

Nits hatch in 7-10 days. Nits cannot hatch at temperatures less than 82°F, but may remain viable and hatch if returned to an optimum temperature between 82°-95°F. Therefore, cold does not kill nits.

Once hatched, the baby louse, called a nymph, goes through three stages before becoming an adult capable of reproducing. This takes 7-12 days. Lice need a blood meal within 5 hours of hatching or they die. After that they can survive 6-48 hours away from a host.

2. How are head lice transmitted/spread?

Head lice can not fly or jump. They crawl from place to place and must pull themselves through fibers or strands of hair. They can not crawl on hard smooth surfaces. Adult head lice and nymphs can be spread from person-to-person or from a contaminated object-to-object. Nits cannot be spread person-to-person or from contaminated object-to-person without some very creative circumstances. They would then need to remain in a person's hair until hatched to cause an infestation.

3. How do I know if my child has head lice?

The only way to be sure a person is infested with head lice is to either see the nits(eggs) or live lice. The nits are easier to see, but can often be confused with dandruff. Nits are small (the size of the eye of a needle), silvery to beige in color and oval shaped. Look for them in the hot spots of the head; at the nape of the neck, behind the ears, and at the crown. They are commonly found 1/4 inch from the scalp. Nits can be found farther away in warmer climates or if the lice have been present for several weeks.

If you see something small and beige in color on the hair, try to flick it off or pull against it. If you feel resistance (it's glued on) and there is more than one, it is probably a nit and is an indication of a head lice infestation. If it "melts" or is easily removed it is more likely dandruff or a hair cast.

Live lice are more difficult to see. When newly hatched they are almost clear in color. As they grow and feed they become darker. They have a tick-like shape and are the size of a sesame seed. They do not like light, so move quickly whenever the hair is disturbed. This is what makes live lice so difficult to see.

Intense head itching is also an indication of a lice infestation. This itching is caused by the lice biting the scalp and inserting an anticoagulant. It is the body's reaction to the chemical that causes the itching. Therefore, itching is usually a late sign of head lice infestation. The person probably has been infested for several days or weeks.

4. **What do I do if my child gets head lice?**

First of all do not panic! Head lice are a nuisance but not a serious health threat. Treatment for head lice infestation involves three things:

- 1) Killing and/or removing the live lice
- 2) Removing all the nits
- 3) Cleaning the environment (bedding, furniture, clothes, toys, etc.)

The key to ending a lice infestation is complete removal of all nits and cleaning of the environment. Nits can be removed with nit combs, fingernails or by cutting the strands of hair which contain nits. There are products on the market to loosen the “glue” attaching the nit to the hair shaft. Vinegar is also effective. Apply a damp towel soaked in vinegar to the head for 30-60 minutes before attempting nit removal. Remember, all nits need to be removed to prevent repeating of the life cycle. This is a painstaking job but necessary. There is a reason for the term “nit picking.” “Live” versus “dead” nits can not be distinguished unless looked at under a microscope. So the best practice is simply to remove them all.

Wash, vacuum or place in plastic bags any items that may have come in contact with your child’s head. This is very important to prevent reinfestation. Lice are killed if they are not allowed to feed for more than 5 days. They are also killed by temperatures over 120° F for 20 minutes. That is why bagging for 14 days and why washing items in hot water and/or drying at high temperatures is effective.

5. **What products are available to treat head lice?**

There are several over-the-counter lice treatments and three prescription medications to treat lice (pediculides). Directions should be carefully followed when using any lice treatment. Minor variations in how they are applied can result in treatment failure. Some lice treatments are ineffective if a creme rinse is on the hair before treatment.

No lice treatment is 100% effective against nits no matter what the manufacturer claims. Pediculides (all except Ulesfia[®] and Ovide[®]) work by attacking the nervous system of the lice. The nervous system of lice eggs less than 4 days old is not yet developed so they are not affected by the pediculides. Ovide[®], a prescription pediculide that is returning to the market, kills lice by different means and so is more effective against the eggs. Ovide[®] is highly flammable and can be absorbed by the skin, causing serious side effects. Ulesfia[®] a new prescription treatment for head lice is an alcohol based lotion thought to work by suffocating the head lice. Lindane, another prescription pediculide, has been documented to cause seizures in children. Remember, you are putting a nerve toxic chemical on a child’s head. Over treatment is strongly discouraged. Unfortunately, resistance is being documented to most pediculides.

There is a product on the market called “Robi Comb” that is an alternative to pediculides. Ask your school nurse about it. There are also many “home remedies” mentioned in the lay literature that have various claims. As long as they are not harmful they can be tried. Do not use animal pesticides or kerosene on children! Do not wrap children’s hair in plastic overnight as it can create a choking hazard.

Parents have reported positive results with vegetable or olive oil treatments. Saturate the hair with oil, wrap with a towel and plastic and leave on for at least two hours (not overnight). Rinse hair with vinegar and comb out all the dead lice and nits. Shampoo as you regularly would do.

6. **How does the BDUSD manage head lice in students?**

Parent of students found to have lice or newly diagnosed infestations are contacted after the infestation is discovered. The student shall be allowed to return to the classroom for the remainder of the day if practical to do so.

While there is no medical reason to remove a child from school due to head lice, the student's parent/guardian or emergency contact may choose to take the student home before the end of the school day to begin treatment and nit removal.

The student shall be readmitted once treatment has been completed. School nurses may assist parents in determining choice of treatment. Students may be re-inspected by the school nurse and/or principal's designee, upon return to school. The goal shall be to assist the family in breaking the cycle of reinfestation and minimize disruption to the student's education. BDUSD does not have a "no nit policy".

A student should not miss more than one day of school following head lice detection. Truancy laws will apply to students missing excessive amounts of school due to head lice infestations.

7. **How can I help prevent my child from getting head lice?**

Teach your children not to share combs, brushes, hair ornaments, and hats. This includes trying on hats in the department store! Have your children place their hats inside their jacket sleeve. Most importantly, do regular head checks on your children. That way you are likely to catch an infestation before it gets too far or spreads to other family members.

8. **Who can I contact to get more information or help with a head lice infestation?**

Your child's school nurse is a good source of information on head lice treatment and prevention.

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You may also contact Dodge County Public Health Department (386-3670) or your private health care provider.