



Facts about Head Lice

Head lice are the cause of much embarrassment and misunderstanding, many unnecessary days lost from school and work, and millions of dollars spent on remedies. Because no disease process is associated with head lice, schools are not advised to exclude students when nits remain after appropriate lice treatment, although further monitoring for signs of re-infestation is appropriate.

- I. Head lice feed on human blood several times a day and live close to the human scalp.
- II. They do not spread disease and, therefore, are not considered a health hazard.
- III. Head lice move by crawling; they cannot hop or fly.
- IV. Transmission in most cases is direct head-to-head contact.
- V. It is common to spread head lice by contact with clothing (such as hats, scarves, coats, and backpacks) or other personal items (combs, brushes, or towels).
- VI. Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with transmission of head lice.
- VII. Lice are not capable of moving to another host within the first few days of hatching and they do not reproduce within their first ten days.
- VIII. Nits may persist after successful treatment.
- IX. The gold standard for diagnosing head lice is finding a live louse, not nits, since studies show only 18 percent of nits go on to hatch.

Life Cycle Facts about Head Lice

I. Life Cycle of a Head Louse

The life cycle of a head louse has three stages:

- A. Eggs;
- B. Nymph; and
- C. Adult.

II. Eggs/Nits

- A. Nits are head lice eggs. They are hard to see and are often confused with dandruff or hair spray droplets.
- B. Nits are about one millimeter long, shaped like a tear drop, and may be pigmented to match the host hair color.
- C. Nits laid closer to the scalp are more viable since body temperature is important to hatching.
- D. Nits take about one week to hatch (range six to nine days). Viable eggs are usually located within six millimeters (1/4 inch) of the scalp.

III. Nymphs

- A. The egg hatches to release a nymph.
- B. The nit shell then becomes a more visible dull yellow and remains attached to the hair shaft.
- C. The nymph is about the size of a pinhead. After feeding, it can appear red (the color of blood).
- D. Nymphs mature after three molts and become adults about seven days after hatching.

IV. Adults

- A. The adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has six legs (each with claws), and is tan to grayish-white. In persons with dark hair, the adult louse will appear darker.
- B. Females are usually larger than males and can lay up to six-10 nits per day.
- C. The life span of the louse is up to 30 days on a person's head. To live, adult lice need to feed on blood several times daily. Without blood meals, the louse will die within one to two days off the host.