

Quick Guide for Removing Head Lice Safely

Lancaster County

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Head Lice Identification

Adult and immature lice look similar. Adults are 1/10 to 1/8 inches long and tan to gray in color (Figure 1). They cannot fly or hop, but crawl quickly. Lice eggs (nits) are white when first laid. The nits turn coffee-colored (Figure 2) before they hatch. Nits are glued to the hair strands about 1/2 inch from the scalp. This glue is so strong the nits cannot be as easily removed as dandruff and other hair debris.

Check Every Member of the Family

Lice are hard to see, so look for tiny, brownish eggs on the hair near the scalp, especially at the nape of the neck and behind the ears. Hatched eggs will be white. Check everyone for lice at least once a week.

Use a Product For Treating Lice

Several products are available without a prescription or talk to your doctor about treatment for head lice. It is very important you follow the label directions on the product **EXACTLY**. You can't count on these products to kill all the lice because some lice may be resistant to products (refer to educational resource, "Managing Head Lice Safely"). Combing is essential to removing those lice not killed by lice products.

What about mayonnaise, olive oil or vaseline? Studies have shown lice can survive after an overnight treatment of mayonnaise, olive oil or Vaseline.

If your time is limited, it is much more important to comb the child's

hair with a nit comb than washing clothes, linens and vacuuming your house.

Combing: a Safe, Non-toxic Method of Lice Control

Focus your control efforts on combing to eliminate lice.

1. Getting ready—You Will Need:

- fine-toothed comb designed for nit removal. A metal comb is less flexible than plastic ones and may be more effective at removing nits.
- bobby pins or hair clips (for long hair)
- a large towel to place around the child's shoulders during combing
- box of facial tissue

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Photo by Barb Ogg

Figure 1. Adult head lice are 1/10 to 1/8" long and are tan to grayish-white (highly magnified view).



Photo by Jim Kalisch, UNL Department of Entomology

Figure 2. Eggs (called nits) are glued to hair strands about 1/2-inch from the scalp (highly magnified view).



Photo by Barb Ogg

Figure 3. When combing, hold the mass of hair with one hand. With the other hand, hold the lice comb in a slanting position with the teeth toward the head.

- wide bowl of water with a squirt of dishwashing liquid

Note: Combing should be done in a well-lighted area. Seat the child so her/his head is just below eye level. It might be a good idea to have something fun to entertain the child that does not require much physical activity. Consider reading, modeling clay, coloring or videos.

2. Preparing the hair—Cover the hair with any type of salad oil or conditioner to keep the hair wet so combing is easier. Remove tangles with a regular hair comb.

3. Combing—Separate a mass of hair about the width of the metal lice comb. It is important to separate the hair into small sections so you can more easily see lice and nits.

Hold the mass of hair with one hand. Insert the lice comb as close to the scalp as possible and gently pull the comb slowly through the hair several times. Check the hair carefully.

Comb one section at a time and check each section again (Figure 3). Pin the hair in a curl flat against the head.

Dip the comb in the soapy water and use the tissue to remove lice and debris. Make sure the comb is clean before you use it on the hair again. Continue combing.

4. Cleaning Up—Flush the contents of the bowl down the toilet. Shampoo the hair at least twice to remove the oil. When the hair is dry,

check for stray nits and remove those hairs individually with a pair of small, pointed scissors. It is VERY important to remove all of the eggs (nits).

Soak the lice comb for 15 minutes in hot ammonia water (1 tsp ammonia to 2 cups hot water). Or, boil the metal comb in plain water for 15 minutes. Use an old toothbrush to clean the comb. The comb can now be used on another family member.

Preventing Re-infestations

After you treat/comb, you'll need to check your child daily for lice. Lice are so small they are easy to overlook. If you missed just a few tiny lice or eggs, the infestation will start over again. Most of the time, parents who complain their children were re-infested, never eliminated all the lice/nits with their first attempt. It may be helpful to use an electronic comb after you wash your child's hair to see if there are live lice you missed (see educational resource, "Managing Head Lice Safely").

Laundering—Head-to-head contact is the most frequent way lice are passed from child to child because lice don't survive for long off the host. But, if you have time, wash bedding, towels and recently worn clothing when you treat your family member. It doesn't have to be done daily. Use hot, soapy water in a washing machine. Drying in a 140 degree F dryer will kill lice and nits.

Vacuuming—Vacuum carpets, pillows, mattresses and overstuffed furniture. Vacuum the car seats. It is recommended you vacuum these items instead of using insecticidal sprays.

Items such as stuffed animals and pillows which are not washable can be stored in tightly sealed plastic bags for two weeks. Lice and their eggs will be killed if they freeze so some items can be placed in a freezer overnight.

Combs and Brushes—Family combs and brushes should be soaked for 15 minutes in very hot water. It might be a good time to get every member of the home their own comb and brush if they don't already have them. Tell your child not to share these items with others.

Remember, it is much more important to comb the child's hair with a nit comb than to spend time washing clothes and linens and vacuuming your house.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

More detailed information can be found in the educational resource, "Managing Head Lice Safely," on the Internet at <http://lancaster.unl.edu/enviro/pest/factsheets/018-99.htm>. Also visit the Web site, "Head Lice Resources You Can Trust," at: <http://lancaster.unl.edu/enviro/pest/Lice.htm>.