

## **My child has head lice – what do I do now?**

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Your child came home from school with a note letting you know that she had head lice. After telling yourself – “NO – not my child”, you inspect your child’s head and see little white beads called nits at the base of her scalp attached to an individual hair. You remember seeing your child scratch her head throughout mealtime that morning and now you know why.

Now what do I do? The note from school may or may not have information about how to control the head lice. Depending on school policy the child may not be able to return to school until you show that you have applied a lice control agent like Nix®(1% permethrin) or a note from a doctor stating that a product like Ovide® (0.5% malathion) has been applied, or an head inspection by the school nurse doesn’t find any nits. Studies have shown that a no-nit school policy isn’t effective in controlling head lice infestations in schools, but it is a policy still in effect in many schools. A child with an active head lice infestation is likely to have had the infestation for at least a month by the time the head lice are discovered.

Head lice are not a public health problem in that the lice do not transmit disease, but having head lice can be a traumatic event for a family. However, with awareness of lice biology and patience the associated problem can be minimized.

Having head lice is a not a measure of your home’s cleanliness. While children are at school they share a lot , be it close head-to-head contact, to combs, hair clips caps, headphones, and sleeping mats. On those items can be mobile adult lice, or lice eggs attached to a hair. An adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed. A female louse can lay 10 eggs (nits) per day, and she can live upwards of 21 days. Eggs are most easily found at the back of the neck at the hairline. Eggs hatch in 10-14 days, into nymphs (immature adults). The nymphs mature into adults in 9 to 12 days, and the cycle begins again. The itching an infested person feels is caused by the saliva the lice inject prior to removing a tiny blood meal from the host. Examine the head under bright natural light. Examine from different angles or light, because newly laid eggs are almost transparent. Examine the scalp, especially the nape of the neck, and behind the ears. Look for eggs about the size of a poppy seed. Eggs are not easily removed from the hair shaft, unlike dandruff. Eggs that will hatch into nymphs are found close to the scalp, within 1 centimeter or 1/3 of an inch or about the width of a pencil.

Using a pesticide to control head lice is often the only management technique used by parents, but you need to remember it is only one part of the management of headlice, combing is an important step also. Use a pesticide according to its label instructions, be it a permethrin based product like Nix® or the doctor prescribed malathion based Ovide® . Following the label instructions protects you and your child’s personal safety, and maximizes the effectiveness of the pesticide in killing the lice. Many parents do not follow up with the second treatment 7 to 10 days after the first treatment, this is important because the pesticide impacts the adults and nymphs, but is not 100% effective against the egg stage. The American Association of Pediatrics in 2007 recommended the malathion-based Ovide® because of permethrin resistance in many lice populations in the United States. Home remedies such as mayonnaise and vinegar have been proven ineffective in controlling head lice.

Trade names are used only to give specific information. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System does not endorse or guarantee any product and does not recommend one product instead of another that might be similar.

Use special 'nit' combs to remove the louse eggs after treating with the pesticide.

#### Manual Removal Steps:

- a) Using the special fine tooth 'nit' comb divide the hair into sections and comb, preferably wet hair
- b) After combing each section dip the comb in hot soapy water to remove the lice and nits from the comb.
- c) Inspect the section you have just combed through, check especially close to the scalp.
- d) Repeat if nits are still attached
- e) Repeat until all sections of the hair are combed
- f) Clean all combs used in the net removal process, including brushes, headphones, hats
- g) Screen other members of the household – adults and children.

Washing and drying clothing and bedding at 130°F will kill all stages of the lice. Items should be in the dryer a minimum of 20 minutes. Treat combs and brushes with boiling water, alcohol, bleach, or soak in a disinfectant solution (e.g., 2% Lysol®). Examine all household members and close contacts and treat them also if they are infested.

Continued diligence in reminding your child not to share items like combs, hats, and sleeping mats with other children is important in minimizing the likelihood of your child's head becoming reinfested. Working with your school nurse and other school administrators in understanding the problem in controlling head lice will help both you and your school deal with the problem.

Web resources used in this article include:

American Academy of Pediatrics --  
Lebwhol, M, Clark, L., Levitt, J., 2007, "Therapy for Head lice based on Life Cycle, Resistance, and Safety Considerations", *Pediatric* 11:965-974

Center for Disease Control [www.cdc.gov/lice/head/](http://www.cdc.gov/lice/head/)

University of California State IPM Program <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7446.html>

Harvard School of Public Health [www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html)