

EAST HAMPTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
Support Services

Prevention and Control of Head Lice

HOW YOU GET IT

Head lice are usually transmitted through close personal head-to-head contact with another infested individual or through use of common combs, brushes, and other grooming aids; through sharing hats, caps, wigs, coats; or through commingling of these items at the homes of friends, at school, or other public places. Most parents have the impression that lice become established on persons who are unclean. In the case of head lice, this is NOT true. Frequent bathing will neither prevent head lice nor eliminate an infestation once it has become established.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Head lice are elongated insects about this (--) long and are grayish white with dark margins. Lice do not have wings, and therefore, cannot fly. They do not jump, but do move quickly; this makes them difficult to find in the child's hair.

Since crawling forms are so difficult to see, the diagnosis of pediculosis infestation is frequently made on the basis of finding nits. A nit is a louse egg. Nits are teardrop in shape, about this size (-), and vary in color from yellowish-brown to white. Head lice attach each nit to a hair shaft with a waterproof, cement-like substance. Thus, nits cannot be washed or brushed out of the hair like dandruff or other debris that sometimes look like nits to the naked eye. Clusters of nits may be found in any section of hair, especially behind the ears and at the back of the neck; but, in mild cases, a careful examination of the entire scalp may be necessary to detect them. Watch for redness of the scalp and for itching. A bright light directed at the scalp can be helpful for identifying nits.

TREATMENT

Treatment is directed at the infested individual and his personal articles, e.g., caps, combs, brushes, towels, bedding, etc. Fumigation or use of insecticides in the home is not recommended by the U.S. Public Health Service.

A. Individual Treatment:

1. Remove outer clothing above the waist. For young children, it may be easier to remove all clothing and place the child in a bath or shower area.
2. Apply head louse shampoo according to your physician's instructions or label instructions provided by the drug manufacturer. Several medicated shampoos (Pediculicides) are available for head lice. Treatment usually consists of wetting the entire scalp and affected areas with the shampoo, working it into the hair for four to ten minutes; then add water, work up a lather, rinse and towel dry.

3. Have child put on clean clothes after treatment. Wash the child's clothes and towels separate from family laundry.
4. Cover the child's shoulders with a clean dry towel; then, fine-tooth comb the hair. Comb small amounts of hair at one time. (Do this outside the house, if possible, until all nits/shells have been removed.)
5. The child may return to school immediately following treatment. Proof of appropriate treatment will be required by the school for reentry (e.g. shampoo box top, written note from physician, etc.)
6. Shampoo the morning after the treatment using a mild shampoo followed by fine tooth combing as above.
7. Carry out fine-tooth combing daily and wash hair thoroughly with regular shampoo until nits are removed.
8. Examine all family members of infested children. Only family members who have nits should be treated. Siblings or a parent who share a bed with a known infested child should be examined very carefully to determine if there is evidence of infestation. Continual awareness and frequent checking is important.
9. Repeat treatment in seven to ten days. While pediculicides rapidly kill crawling lice, they do not kill all the nits. Therefore, the treatment should be repeated in seven to ten days to kill any newly hatched lice. The seven to ten day interval corresponds to the incubation period of a louse's egg. Pediculicide shampoos can be toxic and irritating. These products should not be overused. Follow the instructions for shampooing.

B. Disinfestation of Personal Articles and Environment:

Since heat is lethal to lice and their eggs, personal articles should be machine washed in hot water and/or dried using the hot cycle of the dryer. Eggs are killed in five minutes at 51.5° C. (or 125° F.), and crawling forms succumb to slightly lower temperatures. Home hot water heaters keep water at about 60° C. when the heat selector is set on medium or high. However, some water heaters are not able to sustain the 60° C. water temperature when several loads of laundry are processed one after the other or when other demands for hot water (bathing) are made simultaneously. To maintain the water at 60° C. or higher, allow time between loads of laundry or baths for the water heater to regain its maximum water temperature. If total reliance is placed on the clothes dryer for disinfestations, dry articles for at least 20 minutes at the high setting. Some nonwashable articles may be disinfested in the dryer provided that high heat will not harm the material.

1. Machine wash all washable clothing and bed linens that have been in contact with the infested individual within the previous three days. Personal articles of clothing or bedding that cannot be washed or dried on the high heat setting may be dry cleaned or simply placed in a plastic bag and sealed for a period of ten days.

2. Combs, brushes, and similar items can be disinfested by soaking them in either some of the pediculicide shampoos, or a two percent Lysol solution for one hour, or by soaking them in a pan of water heated on the stove to above 140° F. for five to ten minutes (caution: heat may damage some combs and brushes).
3. The U.S. Public Health Service recommends that environmental clean-up be consistent and limited to careful vacuuming of carpets, upholstered furniture, personal belongings, etc. Use of insecticides or fumigants on upholstered furniture, carpets, bedding, etc., is not recommended.

C. Notification of Other Parents:

Parents of your child's closest friend(s) should be notified that their child may also be infested since the children play together. This is particularly important if the children have slept together or have participated in activities involving frequent body contact such as wrestling, gymnastics, football, etc.

Please call either your physician or the school nurse for further information if you have any questions. You must have your child checked by the school nurse before reentering class.

Thank you for your cooperation.