

# Getting Nit Picky About Head Lice

By Becky Crouse

It's that special time of year again, when you anxiously search through the notices crammed into backpacks, looking for that one special note from your child's school nurse. Yup, I'm talking about the announcement that the annual head lice outbreak has begun.

Now I've done it. I said head lice. A good nit comb, some common-sense knowledge and a lot of patience is all it takes to control these critters.

## What are those critters?

Head lice (*Pediculus capitis*) are bloodsucking, parasitic insects that primarily feed on humans. The adults grow to be from 1-3mm long and are typically reddish-brown in color. They are usually found on the scalp, mainly around the ears and at the nape of the neck, but can also be found on eyebrows, eyelashes and other body hairs, on hats and scarves, and on combs and brushes. Generally, they can only survive off of a host for about 2-3 days without a blood meal.

The female adult can lay anywhere from 50-100 eggs (nits) in her lifetime. With cement-like glue, she attaches each nit to a hair shaft, where they will hatch in 8-11 days. The hatched lice will take another 8 or 9 days to become adults, and, a day later, the female can begin laying eggs. The adults live for 9-10 days, making the entire lifespan of a louse at least 24 days.

## What can a parent do?

Anyone can get head lice, no matter how often you wash or comb your hair. If you have a scalp to nibble on, lice will like you. They move fairly quickly, and are often transmitted through head-to-head contact with an infected person; via nits on fallen hairs that find their way to heads via carpet, furniture, and bedding; and through contact with infested items, such as brushes, combs, hats, scarves, bedding, towels, and upholstered furniture. They cannot jump or fly, so you can rest a little easier knowing that kamikaze head lice won't be dive-bombing your kids' heads while you aren't there.

Now you're wondering how you prevent these little, bloodsucking power walkers from making their home on your child's head. Head lice control involves some pretty basic steps: education, prevention, monitoring, and control. Following these steps should prevent a serious infestation from occurring in your home or school.

## Concise Lice Advice PREVENTION

- Have children establish a no-sharing policy with their friends and classmates when it comes to commonly infested items, such as combs, brushes, hats, scarves, pillows, and blankets or mats at rest time or at home.
- If your kids' classrooms have cubbies or coat hooks that are shared or clustered, have them place their coats and hats in sealed plastic bags to keep wandering adult lice away.
- Braid long hair in the morning, and comb it out upon your child's arrival home.

## MONITORING

- Watch for symptoms of head lice: head scratching, sometimes leading to scalp damage; red bites on the scalp, around the ears, and at the nape of the neck; and the presence of nits in the hair.
- Periodically check your child for nits, whether or not he or she is showing symptoms of head lice, especially if you know there has been an outbreak at school or among friends. Viable nits will be yellowish to grey in color, darkening to a tan or coffee color as they mature, and are shaped like a tear drop. One sure way to distinguish nits from dirt, dandruff, lint, or any of the plethora of things that manage to find their way into kids' hair, is that they will not flick or brush out.

## CONTROL Nit Picking

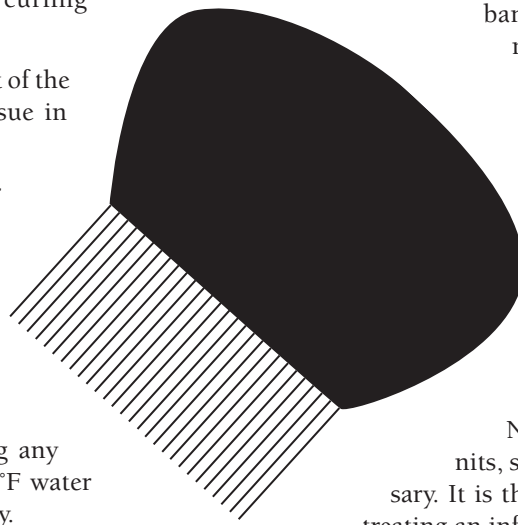


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Nit picking takes time and patience, but can be very enjoyable for both parties. What child doesn't love being the center of Mom or Dad's attention? If, however, your child becomes impatient, sitting in front of a movie or television show, coloring books, or play clay can redirect his or her focus.

- Liberally apply coconut oil to the child's head and scalp. (Any oil should work. It functions as a lubricant to make combing easier and smothers the lice.)
- Once the child is thoroughly slicked, comb through the hair with a wide-toothed comb to remove tangles and straighten the hair.
- Separate the hair into one-inch sections and search thoroughly, both visually and by nit combing.

- Immerse any nits or lice in hot soapy water as they are pulled from the hair.
- Pin cleaned sections of hair aside, curling it close to the head.
- Periodically clean hair and debris out of the comb with a tissue, placing the tissue in hot, soapy water when it is soiled.
- Once finished, wash the child's hair with hot water and blow it dry (remembering that his or her head is much more heat sensitive than yours.)
- Recheck the entire head for stray lice and nits.
- Clean out your nit comb, removing any stray hair and nits, and soak in 150°F water for 15 minutes before putting it away.
- Repeat on every member of the household showing symptoms of head lice for 12 consecutive days.
- Continue to monitor all members of household while and after treating those infested.



on the scalp. It is a possible human carcinogen, and has been linked with blood disorders, and neurological and immunological effects. It has been banned for use in lice and scabies treatment in California. Nix® contains permethrin, also a possible human carcinogen and a neurotoxin, which has been reported to cause temporary nervous disorders in the hands or face. (Please see the *Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP factsheets*.)

There is also widespread resistance of head lice to Lindane and permethrin, rendering these products useless in some cases. No head lice chemical effectively kills all nits, so combing is always going to be necessary. It is the safest and most effective method of treating an infestation.

### Household Cleaning

Lice don't generally infest your home.

- A thorough vacuuming of all carpets, upholstery, and living space will take care of any fallen nit-carrying hairs or runaway lice.
- Wash all bedding, towels used during nit-picking sessions, and questionable clothing in hot water (150°F) and dry on high to take care of any potential re-infesters.
- Place non-washables in the hot drier for 20 minutes or have them dry cleaned. (You can also store the items in a plastic bag for 14-30 days, or freeze them in temperatures of -4° F (-20°C) for 5 hours, or -5°F (-15°C) for 10 hours.)

### Where can I find a nit comb?

If your local drugstore doesn't carry metal-toothed nit combs, you can get the Licemeister® nit comb from the National Pediculosis Association, P.O. Box 610189, Newton, MA 02461, 781/449-NITS, [www.headlice.org](http://www.headlice.org); or the Derbac™ comb from Cereal Soaps Company, Division Johanson Manufacturing Corp., Box 329, Boonton, NJ 07005, 201/334-2676. A dog or cat flea comb may also be effective in a pinch.

### PROBLEMS WITH CHEMICAL CONTROL

Lindane, the active ingredient in Kwell®, a commonly prescribed lice shampoo, is readily absorbed through the skin

### ALTERNATIVES TO CHEMICAL CONTROL

It will always be necessary to nit comb, no matter what course of treatment you decide upon, but if you feel a need to do more than oil and comb, there are **enzyme treatments** for head lice that are not registered as pesticides. Manufacturers describe these products as breaking apart the outer covering or exoskeletons of lice and loosening nits from the hair. They are advertised as non-toxic to humans, but as with any pest control product, **you should be sure to obtain full disclosure of all product ingredients before use.** Enzyme treatments include Not Nice to Lice, 909-372-9850, [www.safe2use.com](http://www.safe2use.com), and Lice B Gone, 877-730-2727, [www.licebgone.com](http://www.licebgone.com). Another plant derived product is Planet Solutions, 301-384-0635, [www.planetsolutions.org](http://www.planetsolutions.org).

### Education

- Talk to school nurses, administrators and teachers, and the parents of your children's friends to ensure that they know proper preventive, monitoring, and control techniques.

- Inform your school and the parents of your children's friends as soon as you discover your child has lice so that they may begin taking preventive and control methods.

With proper monitoring, and preventive measures, and early treatment of your little infestees, you should be able to prevent a serious problem. It's amazing how much aggravation a little education can save.

*Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP has a detailed information packet about head lice control available for \$4ppd.*

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