



Frequently Asked Questions - Lice

What product should I use to treat my child?

There are no over-the-counter or prescription treatments to kill lice that are totally safe and scientifically proven to be 100% effective against head lice and nits. These treatments are potentially harmful pesticides and reliance on them promotes repeated use and contributes to ongoing infestations, outbreaks and resistant strains of head lice.

Various “natural” remedies are vigorously marketed on the Internet but we have found no scientific basis for their claims of efficacy and human safety.

Manual removal of the live lice and nits is the safe alternative and a necessary component of any head lice treatment regimen. The NPA recommends the LiceMeister® Comb to enable families to screen often, detect head lice early and thoroughly remove lice and nits.

Are lice shampoos potentially hazardous?

Although the FDA requires testing for safety before they give their approval to any product, individuals have unique vulnerabilities that must be considered before any treatment.

The NPA warns against the use of any chemicals designed to kill or destroy head lice in any individuals who have a pre-existing illness. This would include, but not be limited to, those with asthma, epilepsy, brain tumors, cancer or AIDS. Those on medication, or who have been previously treated for head lice, as well as pregnant and nursing mothers may be more vulnerable to side effects and should avoid chemical lice treatments for use on themselves or applying them to others.

What chemicals are used in head lice treatments?

Head lice pesticide products contain both “active” and “inert” ingredients. An active ingredient is one that prevents, destroys or repels a pest. An inert ingredient is any ingredient in the product that is not intended to affect a target pest.

For example, isopropyl alcohol may be an active ingredient in some products; however, in other products, it is used as a solvent and considered an inert ingredient. Solvents are materials in which pesticides are dissolved or absorbed (sometimes called carriers or vehicles). They are selected by manufacturers to achieve stability of the active ingredients, promote convenience, ease of handling and application and provide maximum killing power. Exposure to such inerts or solvents can result in significant toxic effects that, in many cases, exceed the toxicity of the active pesticide ingredients.

While the potential risks of active ingredients are accepted, the inert ingredients cannot be overlooked. Many consumers are misled by the term “inert”, believing it to mean harmless. It should never be assumed that inert ingredients are non-toxic.

The concern over inert ingredients and solvents apply to all treatment products.

What about alternative and natural products?

Non-toxic remedies are obviously a preferred choice over pesticides whenever possible.

However, this does not mean that everything touted as "natural" is across-the-board safe.

Many who try "alternatives" have already had failure with readily available pediculicides from the local drugstores. If there is success with such alternatives, we suspect that it may have to do

with motivation and the "parent power" behind the effort - rather than any particular pediculicidal or ovicidal property.

No matter which remedy you're attempting - wrapping the hair in plastic or a shower cap and putting the children to bed is a bad idea. It is also a source of potential harm to use a wrap with any of the pesticidal treatments (whether in bed or not) as it may alter its chemistry and absorption rates.

Effective screening and combing is the ultimate complement to whatever course of action an individual selects. It is impossible to obtain independent scientific data as to the effectiveness and safety on many of the different ideas being circulated about "natural" remedies. Ultimately, it will always be the "parent power" behind the effort that makes the difference.

How do you treat a home or school for lice?

Homes or schools don't get head lice – people do. Head lice are human parasites and require human blood to

survive. Vacuuming is the safest and best way to remove lice or fallen hairs with attached nits from upholstered furniture, rugs, stuffed animals or car seats – wherever someone with head lice may have rested their head. Pesticidal sprays are unwarranted and may pose personal and environmental hazards. Vacuum and save your time and energy for what benefits you the most – thorough nit removal.

Do I have to treat everyone in the house?

Use a nit-removal comb to check everyone. Even if lice are found on an individual, careful consideration should be given before deciding to use a lice killing treatment because each person has unique health vulnerabilities. Lice treatment products are potentially hazardous to health and should not be used “just in case” a child or family member has lice or in an effort to prevent them.

Do I need to spray my furniture and bedding?

Head lice are human parasites and require human blood to survive. They are not environmental pests so pesticidal sprays for furniture and bedding are unnecessary and a serious risk to health. Vacuuming is the safest and best way to remove lice or fallen hairs with attached nits from upholstered furniture, rugs, stuffed animals and cars.

Do I have to bag stuffed animals and other items?

Experts used to suggest bagging items such as stuffed animals for a number of weeks to help bring infestations under control. Since lice cannot survive without human blood, this is unnecessary; vacuuming is a sufficient safeguard for any questionable areas or items that may be in contact with those who are infested.

You can also put bed linens, stuffed animals and other items in a dryer for 30 minutes.

Save your physical and emotional energies for screening and thorough lice and nit removal.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice can be spread whenever there is direct contact of the head or hair with an infested individual. Lice can also be spread through the sharing of personal articles like hats, towels, brushes, helmets, hair ties, etc.

There is also a possibility of spreading head lice via a pillow, headrest or similar items.

Head lice do not jump or fly and generally cannot survive longer than 24 hours off the host.

Do head lice jump?

Head lice do not have hind legs to hop or jump. They also do not have wings and cannot fly.

Can you catch head lice from cars, pillows or furniture?

If a louse comes off the head and is left behind (i.e., on a pillow or head rest), it may be possible for the louse to infest another individual who places their head in that area. Vacuuming is recommended for any areas or items that may be in contact with those who are infested.

Can you catch head lice in a pool, pond or lake?

Swimming with someone who has lice carries no greater risk of transmission than any other activity. When lice are in water, they go into a state of suspended animation but remain firmly locked onto the hair – literally hanging on for dear life. This is how they survive shampooing, rain, seawater and swimming pools. Risk of transmission will occur with the sharing of towels, piling clothing or towels, storing personal items in close proximity or direct head to head contact.

Can you catch head lice from headphones or helmets?

The extent to which head lice are transmitted to others via headphones or helmets is unknown. Ideally, risk of transmission can be eliminated by making sure children have and use their own equipment. If this is not possible, you can clean the items between children by wiping them with a damp paper towel. An additional measure would be to encourage each child to wear a baseball cap to help shield the hair from contact with the item. Helmets and headphone should never be sprayed.

Most importantly – and best for the entire community – all parents should screen their children regularly.

How can I tell if the nits are dead or alive?

Children, like adults, do not want nits in their hair – dead or alive. The time it would take to make the distinction is time far better spent removing ALL the nits. Finding 10 dead nits guarantees nothing for the 11th.

Where do head lice come from?

Head lice do not come out of the air or from the ground. They are human parasites and have probably been here since the beginning of time. Desiccated (dried up) head lice and their eggs (nits) have been found on the hair and scalps of Egyptian mummies.

How can you verify successful treatment?

First, one must define treatment. Someone can be treated and still be infested. The ultimate determination that someone is no longer infested can only be accomplished with a thorough manual screening to confirm the complete absence of lice and nits.

What is the life cycle of the head louse?

Head lice can survive on a human host for approximately 30 days. They generally cannot survive longer than 24 hours off the host.

A female louse lays 3-5 eggs a day. The eggs hatch in 7-10 days and it takes another 7-10 day for the louse to mature and lay their own eggs.

Do pets get head lice?

Head lice cannot be “caught” from pets and cannot survive on pets. They are human parasites and require human blood for survival.

Should fluorescent light be used for lice screening?

Some health professionals recommend the use of fluorescent lighting in screening, but others have reported that it confuses the diagnosis because the light illuminates lint, hair debris and dry skin as well as the nits.

Nits are visible to the naked eye in natural light. If you are unsure whether you are seeing a nit,

use a magnifying glass to take a closer look. For even better results, use the LiceMeister comb to screen through the hair – it will collect even what you cannot see.

Too often, nits are confused with hair debris and children are treated unnecessarily. Be sure you know the difference. The NPA's Critter Card™ has actual images on a handy reference card with instructions to help you distinguish lice and nits from hair debris.

What is the proper procedure for doing head checks?

While rubber gloves may protect the nurse, they will not prevent the communication of infectious dermatological conditions such as impetigo between the students being examined unless the gloves are changed for each exam. Such expenditure in money and time would be impractical for the majority of nurses, who screen hundreds of students at a time and there are more realistic measures available.

NPA promotes the use of disposable wooden screening sticks for each child when doing group screenings.

The sticks, which separate hair strands easily, provide a hygienic approach for nurse and child alike. When there is any question or doubt as to whether a child is infested, we recommend a visit to the nurse's station for a more thorough examination aided by a nit comb.

We also recommend this combing for a child who is returning to the classroom after having had his or her infestation properly managed with manual removal of lice and nits. While visual examinations can detect an infestation, it is what one is unable to see that too often results in chronic infestations where families assume they are "reinfested" but in reality have "stayed infested" because the nits remained to continue the cycle.