

## Lets Talk About head Lice

It's not a subject that we like to think about; nevertheless in this case, knowledge is power.

First of all what are head lice? Their formal name is *pediculus humanus capitus*. They are actually very small bugs (parasitic insects) whose natural habitat is the hair of human heads.

What do they look like? A full grown louse is grey to reddish brown in color and about 2 to 3 millimeters ( less than 1/8 inch ) long.

They have legs but no wings, which (fortunately for us) means that they cannot fly.

They cannot fly or jump, but they can run really fast, and are good at hiding.

### Which came first, the lice or the egg?

In this case, clearly the lice came first. In order to have an infestation of lice in the hair, there must be a female louse which has arrived and laid eggs. A mature louse is anywhere from eight to twenty-eight days old and can lay 3 to 4 eggs in a day.

The eggs are actually laid on the shaft of the hair near the scalp up to a few inches from the scalp. They are about the size of a small piece of dandruff, but unlike dandruff they are attached to the hair with a glue-like substance. They will mature while inside the egg, or nit, and hatch in about six to nine days.

### How do you get lice?

Lice are spread by direct head to head contact with a person who has lice, or by coming in contact with something that a louse happens to be on.

Lice can live only briefly off the human head but can be found on objects that have touched the head such as a comb or brush, hat, scarf, helmet, pillow case, etc.

### How can I keep from getting lice?

I'm glad you asked, because the best way to prevent the spread of lice is to keep from getting them in the first place.

Discourage sharing of personal items such as combs, brushes, scarves, hats, helmets, pillows, etc.

Be careful about direct head-to-head contact such as may occur with hugging, working closely together, whispering, or taking “selfies” - or pictures of yourself and a friend while leaning heads closely together.

Air hugs = no bugs.

## How do I know if I have lice?

One sign that you may have lice is an itchy scalp. The secretions from the lice can cause a reaction that makes the scalp itch. Of course there are other reasons that you could feel itchy such as dandruff or hair products, etc. Even the thought of lice makes many people itch!

If you are concerned that you may have lice, the best thing to do is have someone who has dealt with lice to examine your hair. Perhaps a friend or family member can be of help. They will need to examine all of the hair closely-literally with a fine-toothed comb or something similar. The best place to see them is in bright light, especially a sunny window. They may find live lice, or evidence of eggs attached to one or many hair shafts.

There are also professional companies who will check your hair for a fee.

## We've got lice, now what?

Don't panic!

First of all realize that lice are not dangerous, only very annoying and somewhat challenging to eradicate.

There are many choices of treatment for lice, all aimed at killing the lice and removing any eggs before they have a chance to hatch and become adult lice which can lay more eggs.

There are lice “kits” that can be bought at many local stores. There are many brands on the market and a pharmacist or other healthcare provider can help you decide which may be best for you. Some products contain pesticides and the label directions should be followed carefully to avoid over-exposure to these chemicals.

Basically a “lice kit “will contain a special lice killing shampoo and a lice comb with instructions on how to use both. Even though a shampoo is used, each and every lice egg or empty lice egg

shells (nits) will have to be manually removed. This can be done with the special lice comb or by using your fingernails to pull the egg all the way down and off of each hair.

There are many other products on the market aimed at treating or preventing the spread of lice such as repellent shampoos and sprays, oils and gel products.

The household environment will need to be addressed as well. Washing of bedding and personal items, washing or storage of stuffed animals, etc can be important to prevent re-infestation. There are differing schools of thought regarding each method of cleaning so feel free to check the resources listed at the end of this article or ask your health care provider.

## I need help!

If you are overwhelmed at trying to tackle this on your own, there are private lice removal companies who are available to check for, treat and remove lice, and educate you on how to clean your environment and prevent getting lice again. Some of them also offer products for sale. There is a cost involved, but if one family member is treated, some companies will check the remaining family members at no additional charge, and recheck the individual in a week or so at no additional cost.

See the resource section below for two such companies and feel free to do your own research.

## How can my school help?

As in other health-related areas, the school nurse can be of assistance.

If a student exhibits symptoms of head lice, he/she may be sent to the clinic to be checked.

Forsyth County schools are serious about helping to prevent the spread of lice in school. To that end, there is a no-nit policy in place for all Forsyth County schools. This means that if a student is found to have lice, they must be picked up from school and may not return until they have been treated and every nit removed. When the student returns to school, a parent/guardian must bring them to the school clinic before the start of the school day to be checked by the nurse. If any nits are found, they will not be allowed to stay in school and the lice/nits will need to be removed as described earlier. There are two days excused absence allowed for treating lice, but a student may return as soon as the problem is resolved.

If evidence of head lice is found in a class at school, per county policy, notification will be sent home to the families of students in that class. This will generally be forwarded in an email from the nurse sent via the teacher.

If there is strong concern that lice may be present in a certain class, that class may be checked for lice by the nurse or her designee. This is very time-consuming and therefore our practice is to inform the parents so that they may take responsibility for their own students.

## This is embarrassing!

If your family has the misfortune to contract head lice you do not have to feel alone. Many others have experienced this and lived to tell about it!

There is no shame in having lice, it can happen to anyone. Lice are actually said to prefer clean hair. The best thing you can do is be honest with your friends and family members. You want to help them avoid also getting lice or if they have already had it, benefit from their experience and help. Most friends will appreciate your honesty. Some lice companies will even come out to check for and educate your group about head lice for a modest fee per person.

Working together, we can all help to diminish the impact of lice in our community.

Leigh Ann Odom (Nurse Annie)

### Sources and Resources :

Forsyth County Schools Health Services Handbook

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

[www.mayoclinic.org/diseases.../lice/basics/.../con-20021627](http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases.../lice/basics/.../con-20021627)

[www.headlice.org](http://www.headlice.org)

Head Hunters : [www.headlicesspecialist.com](http://www.headlicesspecialist.com)

Lice Ladies : [www.liceladiesatlanta.com](http://www.liceladiesatlanta.com)

