

## HEAD LICE (Pediculosis) FACT SHEET

### What are head lice?

- Head lice are tiny insects that live and breed on the scalp, where they lay their eggs.
- Head lice feed by biting the scalp to obtain blood.
- Head lice do not spread disease.
- Head lice are common especially among children ages 3 – 10 and their families.

### What do head lice look like?

Lice have 3 stages – the egg (nit), the nymph and the adult.

- **Nits** are whitish-grey, tan or yellow ovals, approximately the size of a grain of sand. They stick to the hair close to the scalp and can look like dandruff. Nits hatch in 9 – 10 days.
- **Nymphs** are baby lice. They look like adult lice but are smaller.
- **Adult lice** are approximately the size of a sesame seed and are hard to see. Adult lice can live for up to 30 days on a person's head, but they die within 3 days away from the scalp.

### What are the symptoms?

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair.
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites.
- Sores on the head caused by scratching (these sores can sometimes become infected).

### How are head lice spread?

- Close head-to-head contact with someone who already has head lice.
- Sharing hats, scarves, combs, brushes, hair ribbons, pillows or towels recently used by someone with head lice.

### How do you check for head lice?

- To confirm a case of head lice, you need to find live lice. Children usually have no more than 10 – 20 live lice.
- Good lighting is important when you are checking.
- Head lice move fast and are hard to see. They are usually found very close to the scalp, at the bottom of the neck and behind the ear.
- To look for nits, part hair in small sections, moving from one side of the head to the other.



*Nits attached to the hair.*



## How can head lice be treated?

- There are many products available to treat head lice. In Canada, 3 insecticides and 1 non-insecticide have been approved for treating head lice.
  - **Pyrethrin** (found in R & C Shampoo & Conditioner)
  - **Permethrin** (found in Nix Creme Rinse or Kwellada-P Creme Rinse)
  - **Lindane** (Hexit Shampoo or PMS – Lindane Shampoo). This product can be toxic.
  - **Isopropyl Myristate/cyclomethicone** (Resultz) a non-insecticide has also been approved for use in Canada, but should not be used on children younger than 4 years.
- A prescription is not required for these products. Your local pharmacist is a good resource when deciding what product to use.
- If the camper is under 2 years of age, has a seizure disorder or a scalp infection, consult with a physician before using any of the products listed above.

## What about other treatments?

- Some people use home remedies such as mayonnaise, petroleum jelly, olive oil, vinegar or tea tree oil. There is no evidence that these products work to treat head lice.
- **Never use gasoline or kerosene.** These products can be extremely dangerous.

## With any product used, it is important that you:

- Follow the directions on the package carefully.
- Don't leave the shampoo or rinse in the hair longer than directed.
- Rinse hair well with cool water after treatment. It is best to rinse over a sink, not in the bath or shower, so that other parts of the body do not come in contact with the product.
- Repeat the treatment as directed, usually after 7 – 10 days.
- Do not treat anyone with a head lice product unless you find lice in their hair.
- Remove any nits.

## When can a camper return to camp?

- Campers with head lice should be treated. Once treated they can attend camp as usual.
- They should be advised to avoid head-to-head contact with other children.

## What should the Camp Director do?

- Check the other campers and staff in the cabin for head lice.
- Notify families that there was a camper with lice. There are a lot of sample letters available on the internet.
- Ensure campers do not share combs, hairbrushes, caps, hats or hair ornaments.
- Helmets should be cleaned between campers.
- As head lice do not live long off the scalp, there is no need for extensive cleaning.
- To get rid of lice or nits from items such as hairbrushes, hats, sleeping bags or pillowcases:
  - Wash the item in hot water and dry in a hot dryer for 15 min; or
  - Store the items in an airtight plastic bag for 2 weeks.
- There are a number of private companies that will do lice checks on all campers for a fee. Check the OCA commercial membership list for contact information.

## References:

Canadian Paediatric Society, [www.caringforkids.cps.ca](http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca), Head Lice Fact Sheet, 2008.

Toronto Public Health Department, Head Lice Fact Sheet, February 2005. [www.toronto.ca/health](http://www.toronto.ca/health)

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