

Head lice

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What are lice and which problems can they trigger?

Head lice are small insects which only live in human being's heads. They get nourished by biting a human being several times a day. Their bite is painless but the patient turns to be allergic to this parasite's saliva and this makes the intensity of the itch vary. No illnesses are transmitted (whereas body lice do). The only possible trouble is the skin infection due to excessive scratching. They are transmitted by direct contact (hair to hair). The infection due to contact with objects such as combs or clothes is unlikely because the louse dies if it does not bite, baby lice in few hours and adults in one day or so. scratching due to us y possible trouble us

The female louse becomes adult in about 2 weeks and live three or four weeks more approximately. In this period they can lay some nits a day. The nit has ovoidal form, it is white and is strongly stuck to someone's hair, near to the skin since it needs heat to incubate. The louse is born in 9 days on average. Taking into account hair growth, nits which are located more than 1 cm. from the skin are usually empty eggshells from baby lice. Baby lice have a pale colour and are 1 mm. long. Adult lice can be 3-4 mm. long and are dark.

How are they treated?

1. Up to two years old: Hair can be cut (the shorter, the better) and hand treatment to eliminate lice and nits is needed (you will need patience, good light, good sight or a magnifying glass). If the hair is not to be cut, buy moisturizing cream (they are all valid although there are some special for lice) and a comb. Use the cream and the comb regularly and verify if some lice are trapped. Repeat this operation three days so that in three consecutives combing processes no lice are observed. Use your hands to eliminate the nits in the interval among the combing

processes. If this is not successful, an insecticide called permethrin can be used (only in children who are more than two months).

2. Older than two years old: The previous recommendations can be followed, an insecticide can also be used or both treatments can be combined. The most effective insecticide is permethrin. There are some preparations with permethrin whose concentration are close to 1% and which are used against lice. Use it as specified by the manufacturer (for about 10 minutes) and use a good comb before rinsing. If it is effective, the lice will not be able to move, itch will stop and will not take place in the following days. Some years ago, permethrin was so effective than a single use was valid. Nowadays, lice are tough in some locations so that even if the first use seems effective, it is advisable: firstly, to eliminate the nits using your hands; secondly, use the moisturizing cream and the comb three and six days later; and thirdly, use permethrin again 9 days later. If the first use of permethrin does not work (itch can be felt and alive lice are seen in your comb, there are two options:

a. Use permethrin immediately and leave it for eight hours. A third use could be necessary 9 days after the second one.

b. Instead of permethrin, an alternative insecticide (malathion) can be used. Malathion is more effective than permethrin and more toxic as well. After using malathion, it is recommend to eliminate the nits and use the comb. A second use is not usually required.

There are other treatments but they are only to be used if the former two are not effective.

When can children be back to school? How to prevent infection

Let us not forget that lice are transmitted "hair-to-hair". Babies are more likely to have this kind of contact. A child which is being treated due to the existence of nits does not need to leave

school. The risk of transmission gets lower by putting one's hair up (pigtails, buns) or covering them (handkerchiefs). Infected children and their classmates can undertake these actions. Short hair is a way to prevent infection and it also makes any treatment easier. Brushes, combs, hats or ribbons are not to be shared if there is an infected person.

There are some repellent substances but not enough studies have been made to recommend their usage. An insecticide must never be used as a repellent or preventive medicine.

When there are some infections in the same class or family, it is advised that everyone is checked

every 2 or 3 days because some, specially at the beginning of the infection, can have few or no symptoms (they do not scratch). A child who does not scratch is not to be treated unless alive lice or nits very close to the hair are observed.

Other preventive actions about environment, as clearing towels at a temperature of 60°, hats, sheets, pillow covers, etc., aspirating not washable clothes in contact with the head and keeping not washable objects in plastic bags for 2 weeks (maximun period of survival of a nit) can be done but not in an obsessive way because they are probably unnecessary.



From baby to adult lice



Lice of diferent size