

Guess What I Brought Home From School?

Colds, flu, pinkeye, ringworm, pinworm, impetigo and head lice are all common diseases that cause absence from school.

Although head lice has long been thought of as a sign of poor hygiene, there is no justification for this stigma; anyone with hair can get head lice! As a matter of fact, head lice occurs more often on clean heads than on dirty ones. The primary sign of head lice is frequent head scratching, especially behind the ears. Scratching is often so intense that noticeable scratch marks can be seen on the scalp and behind the ears.

Lice are blood-sucking parasites that depend on their hosts for food and warmth. Transmission of head lice occurs through direct contact with the hair or scalp of an infested individual; although infected inanimate objects, such as combs, hats, linens, pillows, upholstered furniture, etc. may also be a source of transmission. Lice feed approximately 5-7 times per day. Lice can be difficult to detect because they are small and run quickly from light.

Lice are typically sighted on the crown of the head, behind the ears, and at the nape of the neck. Sometimes, on an individual with long hair, bites may be visible along the neck. Systematic symptoms of illness, such as fever, are not characteristic of head lice infestations.

Currently there are 3 compounds available for treatment of head lice in the United States. To eradicate head lice and nits, it is essential to follow product directions exactly. Incorrect use of first-line treatments is one of the most significant causes of persistent infestations. Be sure to:

- Read directions carefully.
- Leave the compound on the hair for the specified amount of time.
- Spend adequate time combing nits with a comb.
- Comb only small sections of hair at a time.
- Keep nits away from eyes by coating eye lashes and eyebrows with petroleum jelly, when removal is needed in these areas.
- Repeat treatment after 7-10 days (After 7-10 days, any nits that were missed will have hatched, but resulting insects will not have matured to produce more eggs, which would cause a continued infestation cycle.)
- Linens, hats, combs, pillows and other items that have come into contact with the infested individual's head should be washed in hot water (130-150 degrees) for at least 5-10 minutes and dried in a hot dryer (at least 20 minutes). Items that cannot be washed should be sealed in a plastic bag for 1-2 weeks.
- Carpeting and upholstery in the home and car should be thoroughly vacuumed. Using a hot iron on upholstery is also advised (check the temperature of the iron to make sure it is safe before ironing upholstery).
- Other members of the household should be checked and treated simultaneously if necessary.

Children with head lice can miss weeks of school, and will not be permitted to attend until free of infestation. Thus, it is essential that parents and other care providers know how to manage the problem.

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