

# Lice and Nits FAQ's

Unfortunately, head lice and children will always go hand in hand. If your child has not had lice, it is very likely that your child, at some point, will be found to have lice. There are a lot of misconceptions about head lice and nits floating around. To that end, I have put together this FAQ sheet designed to answer the most commonly asked questions regarding lice, and to help families better understand lice, their nits, effective and ineffective treatments.

## **What is lice?**

Lice are small harmless insects that have lived in the hair of humans for as long as history has been recorded. An adult louse is about the size and color of a small sesame seed.

## **What are nits?**

Nits are the eggs laid by female lice. Nits are smooth, oval-shaped structures which are attached to the side of the hair shaft. They range in color from off-white to brown. Lice lay their eggs and attach them to human hairs by secreting a "cement like" fluid.



## **How does someone contract head lice?**

There are really only two ways in which someone "gets" lice: 1) when someone's hair comes into contact with the hair of someone who has lice, 2) when someone's hair comes into contact with fabric that contains live lice that have migrated very recently from the hair of someone who has lice. Contrary to belief, head lice cannot jump or fly; only crawl. A person cannot catch lice by simply sitting near someone who has lice. Elementary school-aged children tend to contract lice more than other age groups because they play close together, tend to share their belongings, and their short height puts their heads in contact with seat cushions more than other age groups. While many people believe that schools are the prime location for the transmission of head lice, the truth is that children can just as easily attract head lice in other places such as movie theatres, restaurants, buses, or anywhere else where they may rest their heads against a seat where others have rested their heads.

## **What is the Department of Education's policy regarding head lice and nits?**

The Department of Education has a "no head lice" policy which means that students who have been found to have *live* head lice are not allowed to attend school until they are free of lice. This policy does not include nits (lice eggs). Students found to have nits, but no live lice, may remain in school.

## **Why are students with nits allowed to remain in school?**

The policy that allows students with nits to remain in school stems from three important facts:

- Nits cannot be transmitted from one child to another.
- Nits (and live lice for that matter) are not known to transmit any infectious agents from person to person and pose no known health risks.
- Research by the American Association of Family Physicians demonstrates that the majority of students found to have nits never develop live lice (2003).

## **What should I do if my child is sent home with live lice?**

While the Department of Education states that children must be lice free to return to school, treatment for lice is a personal decision. The Harvard School for Public Health recommends the following procedures:

- Comb hair thoroughly with a louse comb.
  - Use conditioner to lubricate hair and comb
  - Most lice should be removed during this first combing
- Repeat every day for about a week and a half.
  - Each subsequent combing will continue to remove any new lice that may have hatched
- Treatment with over the counter products *may supplement combing, but should not replace combing*. That's because products sold that kill head lice don't kill nits.
- After a week and a half, the threat of any new lice is most likely eliminated and removal of remaining nits is a personal choice as these are likely to be dead or already hatched.
- Change and launder pillow cases, sheets, pajamas and towels.
- While not part of the Harvard recommendations, it's probably a good idea to launder recently worn jackets and hats as well.

One shot visits to lice “specialists” or salons are expensive and, quite frankly, not nearly as effective as diligent combing for a week and a half.

Your child is free to return to school at any time, provided there are no live lice present. His/her hair must be inspected by the school’s designated “lice checker” (yours truly). In addition, his/her hair will be subsequently rechecked in 14 days to ensure that their hair remains lice free.

### **Should I do anything to clean my home?**

Remember, homes and classrooms don’t get lice—people do. The simple truth is that lice must feed every 4-6 hours and will die if they are without a host for more than 24 hours. Furthermore, according to the Harvard School for Public Health, “the chances of a live head louse or egg ‘reuniting’ with a person are extremely remote. Accordingly, Herculean steps to clean lice from the house or car by intensive washing or vacuuming will result in a cleaner space, but are unlikely to significantly facilitate the goal of eliminating the lice from those residing in the home.”

If you feel that you simply must do something, 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 *recently* rested their head. In addition, a clothes dryer set at high heat will, in most cases, effectively kill any lice or their eggs on pillowcases, sheets, nightclothes, towels and similar items.

*Pesticide sprays and over the counter remedies are unwarranted and, unlike lice and nits, may pose real personal and environmental hazards.*

### **Why doesn’t the school nurse check for head lice and nits?**

Because head lice are not known to transmit any infectious agents from person to person and pose no known health risks, they are not considered a medical or public health problem. That being said, the school nurse is a wonderful resource for information regarding lice, nits and their identification and treatment.

### **Why doesn’t the Department of Education allow school-wide surveillance for lice and nits?**

School-wide/class-wide screenings are expensive and time consuming. But most importantly, screenings have never proven to be an effective method for containing/preventing the spread of lice.

### **What is the best way to check for lice and nits myself?**

The following steps are the most widely recommended:

1. Shampoo and condition the hair of the person being checked for nits so the hair is clean, wet and free of tangles.
2. Turn on a bright source of light. Have the person stand or sit underneath the light.
3. Separate the hair into one-inch sections using a nit or fine-toothed comb.
4. Check the hair shaft; particularly near the scalp. Look for smooth oval eggs stuck to the side of the hair shaft (a magnifying glass helps tremendously, but is not necessary). Any nit that is more than one-quarter inch away from the scalp is an old egg that has migrated up the hair shaft with normal hair growth and is generally not a threat to hatch.
5. Remove nits by sliding them up and off the end of the hair shaft.

If you should find nits on your child’s head, it will be important to repeat this procedure nightly for about a week and a half.

Live lice are harder to detect simply because they are small and move. If you suspect your child might have live lice, the best way to check/remove them is to follow the steps recommended above by the Harvard School for Public Health above by combing the hair thoroughly with a lice comb.

Gary Shevell

The information for this FAQ sheet came from the following sources:

The New York City Department of Education: <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/Health/Pediculosis/default.htm>

The Harvard School for Public Health: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/>

The American Academy of Pediatrics: <http://www.aap.org/>