



Head Lice: Strategies for Success

Head lice are an extremely common problem, and the solution lies in cooperation. Child care providers and parents can form an effective team to prevent the spread of lice by establishing sensible policies and respecting those policies. Don't panic! Learn more about lice and act.

What are head lice?

Head lice are insects that live on the human scalp and feed on blood by biting the scalp. This biting causes intense itching. Head lice do not jump or fly, and they do not live on pets or animals other than humans. They lay eggs (nits) which attach to the hair shaft and hatch in about six to 10 days.

Who gets head lice?

Anyone can get head lice. Young children are particularly at risk because the school or child care environment provides many opportunities to pass lice from one person to another, no matter how clean the environment is.

How are head lice spread?

Since they don't jump or fly, head lice must crawl from one person or object to another. This happens when heads touch (sleeping together, hugging, playing), or personal items are shared (combs, brushes, hats, carseats, bedding).

How are head lice diagnosed?

Diagnosis is usually made by finding nits attached to the hair near the scalp. Scratching or scratch marks on the scalp, behind the ears, or on the nape of the neck may be a good clue.

How are head lice treated?

Treatment involves getting rid of the lice and nits from the infected people, environment and personal items. Nits must be killed to prevent them from

hatching. Individuals must be reinspected to prevent reinfestation from missed nits.

How can you help prevent the spread of head lice?

Teach children not to share personal items such as hats, combs, brushes, hair ribbons, scarves, towels or bedding. Place items in children's cubbies so that coats and clothing do not touch. Inspect children's heads regularly for lice or nits.

When can a child return to child care?

Some programs allow children to return as soon as they have been treated with pesticide shampoo. Others require that not even a single nit be present before a child is readmitted. Your program will need to establish its own policy on when children can return to care. It is important that you make your policy clear to parents and staff, and that you stick to it consistently. The Healthline can provide you with information on head lice and help you develop your policy. Call us at (800) 333-3212.

If you have head lice in your program

Get a handle on the real problem

Detection and treatment, while important, are not the only aspects of effective head lice control. In fact, a lot of the frustration of dealing with head lice comes from policies that don't get to the heart of the problem, or poor communication between all of the parties involved. Education and cooperation must be an ongoing and routine part of your child care program if you truly want to minimize head lice.

Develop a clear written policy

Consider a "nit-free" policy. This means that there must be no nits present in the hair, dead or alive. This

way you don't have to determine whether or not the nits are actually dead. At the very least, children should be excluded from care until after treatment has been initiated or there are no nits present.

Communicate your policy to families and staff

Make sure everyone understands what the policy means and how it will be enforced. Make this a part of enrollment procedures. Head lice are a special condition and require special attention, so address it separately from other illness exclusion policies.

Make "head checks" a daily or weekly activity

Create a special game or activity that allows staff to examine each and every child's head for lice. Friday afternoon is a good time so that families can treat and nit-pick over the weekend. Monday mornings are good so that staff can send infested children home before the lice spread to others. Making this part of your routine helps avoid singling out children who may feel self-conscious about head lice.

Include head lice as a topic for parent/staff meetings and newsletters

Regularly engage parents and staff in discussions about identifying and treating head lice. Do this routinely, not just when there is a case in child care. This allows everyone to express their fears, concerns, successes and failures in a safe environment. Assure that families and staff understand the importance of identifying cases early and carefully treating the entire family, house or facility.

Do everything within your power to make head lice nonthreatening

You'll get much more cooperation from people if staff, children and parents feel like they are all part of the solution rather than the source of the problem. Keep the issue a priority and celebrate your successes. Encourage sharing of ideas and information. Keep in contact with your county health department to find out about new treatment products or educational materials.

Support one another

Staff can offer moral support to families having a particularly difficult time treating a case. Treatment can be expensive and time-consuming. Families

may need extra assistance in meeting your policy requirements. Help one another problem-solve. Call the Healthline at (800) 333-3212 if you need additional information or materials.

Teach and practice healthy habits for children

Teach children not to share personal items such as hats, combs, brushes, hair ribbons, scarves, towels or bedding. Space children's cubbies so that coats and clothing do not touch.

Treatment issues

- Do not use shampoos which contain conditioners before treatment because they can coat the hair and protect the nit. Do not use a vinegar rinse after using medications because it can deactivate the chemicals and reduce the effectiveness of the treatment.
- Treat children at the sink, not in the shower or bathtub, to minimize body contact with the pesticides in the medications.
- Remember that none of the chemical treatments are 100 percent effective in killing lice and nits. Removal by hand and comb is essential. Retreatment may be needed on the eleventh day after the first treatment. Parents should check with their pediatrician before treating more than twice.
- Always follow medication instructions. Consult your pediatrician or pharmacist if you are pregnant or nursing. We do not recommend using products which contain lindane.
- Wash all personal items and bedding in hot water and dry in a hot dryer. Vacuum non-washable items, furniture and car upholstery.
- Contact the National Pediculosis Association (NPA) at (800) 446-4NPA, or the California Childcare Healthline at (800) 333-3212.

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