

Frequently asked questions: Head lice in schools

What are head lice?

Head lice are small wingless insects about the size of a sesame seed, and usually greyish-brown in colour, although their colour may vary. One of these insects is called a louse, and the eggs of the louse are called nits. Head lice live on the scalp and feed on tiny amounts of blood from the scalp, which can cause itching. Head lice are spread easily by head-to-head contact. While having an itchy scalp from lice bites is a common sign, head lice infestations can be asymptomatic for weeks. Adult lice or eggs (nits) can be seen with the naked eye, often behind the ears and near the nape of the neck. They do not spread disease, and anyone can get them. They are more common in children as their heads often touch when they play together. Head lice may also be spread through objects like scarves, brushes, headphones, hats and helmets.

How are lice transmitted?

Head lice are generally spread through direct head-to-head contact with an infected person and move by crawling; they do not jump or fly. Transmission by sharing infested belongings such as bedding, clothing or headwear may also occur.

Can children attend school if they have head lice and/or nits?

When a child is found to have head lice, they may remain at school. There is no medical reason for excluding a child with nits or live lice from school. It is essential to handle the situation sensitively and to minimize any embarrassment to the child. Inform parents/caregivers if a child is suspected of having head lice so they can receive treatment. While head lice infestations are common, they are not dangerous, nor do they indicate uncleanliness or spread disease.

Do we need to report to Ottawa Public Health if there are cases of head lice in our school?

No, reporting to Ottawa Public Health is not required.

When head lice are identified in a classroom, are notices sent home to the entire school or just the classroom that is affected?

The families of children in the same classroom or childcare setting where an active case of head lice has been detected should be notified. The principal can send the Notice to Parents About Head Lice and the [Head Lice Fact Sheet](#) to parents of children in the classroom or daycare group where lice has been identified.

Do environments need to be disinfected after detection of head lice?

Head lice do not survive more than 3 days away from the warmth and humidity of the scalp. Nits will hatch in 7 to 10 days. Wash combs, brushes and hair accessories with hot, soapy water until all lice or nits are removed; and then soak them in very hot water for 10 minutes. Wash clothing, bed linens and towels in hot soapy water, then put in a hot dryer for 15 minutes. Items that cannot be washed such as blankets, coats and stuffed animals, can be put in a plastic bag for 14 days. Avoid sharing hairbrushes while undergoing treatments. There is no need for extra school cleaning. Insecticide sprays should not be used.

What options are available for treating head lice?

Treatment options for a head lice infestation include topical insecticides and oral agents. Non-

insecticidal products have also been approved by Health Canada and can be obtained over the counter without a prescription. Most products require two treatments. The first will kill the head lice but not all nits. The second treatment, given 7 to 10 days after the first, will kill the nits that have hatched. Alternative methods such as mineral oil and vinegar, petroleum jelly, mayonnaise and hair gel have been used to treat head lice, but these methods have not been proven to work. Please refer to the [Head Lice Fact Sheet](#) for more information.

Does nit removal need to be a part of the treatment?

After head lice are treated, daily nit removal and hair combing can help to prevent a new infestation. Even with careful nit picking some live nits can be missed. Children may return to school or childcare facility even if nits remain in their hair. For detailed information on how to remove nits, refer to the [Head Lice Fact Sheet](#).

Are lice treatments covered by OHIP?

There may be coverage for specific head lice treatment products under OHIP+. OHIP+ covers the cost of certain prescription drugs for anyone 24 years and under who are not covered by a private plan. A health card number and an eligible prescription from a health care provider are required. Please speak to a health care provider or pharmacist about options.

Does Ottawa Public Health provide assessments (head checks) or treatments for head lice in schools?

Ottawa Public Health nurses do not go into schools to provide head lice and nit assessments or treatment services. Several local businesses provide assessment and treatment services for a cost. OPH does not recommend any particular company, so if you choose to utilize these services, it is advisable to conduct your own comprehensive research independently.