

Lice 101: Myths and Realities about Head Lice

(Reprinted from **Demystifying Pediculosis: School Nurses Taking the Lead**. D. Pontius. *Pediatric Nursing*. September–October 2014. Volume 40. No. 5)

Definitions:

Lice: More than one louse

Nit: Eggs, dead or alive, of a louse

Pediculosis: Having an infestation of lice

Louse: Small insect that lives on the scalp

Parasite: Lives off another, in this case, the blood of humans

Infestation: Having an insect present, in this case, in your head

Myths	Truths
Head lice are easy to get.	Lice are spread only mainly by head-to-head contact. They are much harder to get than a cold, flu, ear infection, pink eye, strep throat, food poisoning, or impetigo.
You can get lice from your dog, guinea pig, or other animal.	Lice are species-specific. You can only get human lice from another human. You cannot get another animal's lice.
You can get head lice from hats and helmets.	Rarely, but possible. It is prudent however to recommend not sharing any hair items. Slick helmets (baseball, hockey helmets) pose no risk of transmission. Sharing beds is noted to be a significant risk of transmission.
School is a common place for lice transmission	School is an unlikely source of transmission. Much more common are family members, overnight guests, and playmates that spend a large amount of time together. Schools often see a spike in cases of lice after a school break, such as the beginning of school year, after Christmas, and again after spring break. This is often falsely attributed to a return to the school environment, but is actually due to being in the community for an extended period of time.
Poor hygiene contributes to lice	Hygiene makes absolutely no difference. You can get lice by close personal head-to-head contact with someone else that has lice, not by being dirty.
Lice can jump or fly from one person to another	Lice can only crawl. They can neither fly nor jump. They must crawl from one person to another.

Any nits left in the hair can cause lice to come back.	Any nits farther than one quarter to one half inch from scalp on hair shaft are ALREADY HATCHED and pose no risk to others.
Eggs or nits can fall out of hair, hatch, and cause lice in another person	Nits are cemented to the hair and are very hard to remove. They cannot fall off. Newly hatched lice must find a head quickly or will die.
Lice can live a long time.	Lice live only 1 to 2 days off the head. Each louse only lives about 30 days on the head.
All members of the family should be treated is one person has lice.	Only the person with lice should be treated. Lice shampoos are INSECTICIDES and can be dangerous if used incorrectly or too frequently. Household members and close contacts should be checked, but only treat those who actually have lice. The house should NOT be sprayed with insecticide, nor used on clothing or other items.
Checking a classroom when one student has lice can prevent lice from spreading.	Classroom transmission is EXCEEDINGLY RARE and checking students is a waste of valuable teaching time. Checking family members and close playmates is much more appropriate.
Avoiding lice is important as they spread disease.	Head lice do not spread any known disease. They are annoying and irritating, but not dangerous.

More information about head lice can be found at:
<http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/schools.html>