



# Guidance for Mitigation of Head Lice in Community Congregate Settings

## Background

Head lice, also known as *Pediculus humanus capitis*, is a parasite that can be found on the head, eyebrows, and eyelashes of an infested person and feed on human blood, but they are not known to transmit disease. Head lice are mainly spread from direct contact with the hair of an infected person and is not related to the cleanliness of the person or their environment. The most common route of transmission is through head-to-head contact with someone who is infested with head lice. Head lice is *not* a reportable disease, but anyone who has head lice should receive treatment in order to prevent further spread to others.

### **What symptoms are associated with Head Lice?**

The diagnosis of head lice is best made by finding live nymph or adult louse on the scalp or hair of a person suspected of being infested. However, they can sometimes be difficult to find due to these parasites' small size, ability to move quickly, and desire to avoid light. If crawling lice are not found, identifying nits (eggs of head lice) within ¼ inch of the base of the hair can suggest, but not confirm, infestation. Other symptoms indicative of infestation may also include:

- A tickling feeling of something moving in the hair
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of head lice
- Irritability and difficulty sleeping due to head lice being more active in the dark
- Sore on the head caused by scratching

### **Risk Factors Associated with a Head Lice Infestation:**

It is important to note that anyone can develop a head lice infestation, regardless of personal hygiene practices, however there are groups of people at higher risk in certain settings including:

- Preschool and elementary aged children
- Household members and caretakers of preschool and elementary aged children
- Anyone sharing personal belongings (clothing, bedding, brushes, etc.) with an infested person

### **How long does it take from exposure to onset of symptoms?**

Not everyone will experience symptoms of infestation and may take days or weeks following exposure to diagnosis of infestation. When head lice lay nits it can take about 8-9 days for them to hatch and continue replicating. Close contacts to a person infested with head lice should continue monitoring themselves/have parents or caregivers inspect for signs of infestation for 3-4 weeks following exposure (the average life cycle of head lice is 28 days).

### **Immediate Next Steps for Case Treatment and Monitoring:**

Upon the identification of a resident or staff with symptoms consistent with a head lice infestation:

1. Have a facility staff member (healthcare or non-healthcare) or parent/caretaker inspect the suspect case to determine if there is evidence of infestation.

2. If the case is confirmed or highly suspected to have head lice (see section on “Symptoms Associated with Head Lice Infestation” for instructions on diagnosis), treatment should be started as soon as possible. Treatment is available either over-the-counter or by a health care provider. It is important to follow the directions of treatment medications to ensure treatment is successful.
3. All close contacts to an active case of lice should be inspected for evidence of infestation and treated accordingly. In some instances/settings it may be beneficial to prophylactically treat household close contacts and those that share bedding, clothing or other linens at the same time as the case to prevent spread.
4. If live head lice are still present on a person 8-12 hours following treatment, the case may require a second round of treatment to ensure all live lice have been killed, lowering the risk for self-reinfestation. Continue to monitor the case for 2-3 weeks following treatment to ensure there is no evidence of a continued infestation.
5. Belongings (bedding, clothing, and other belongings a person wore or used up to two days preceding diagnosis and treatment) of an active case of head lice should be machine washed and dried with hot water (130 degrees Fahrenheit). Items that are not able to be machine washed can be dry cleaned or sealed for two weeks. Head lice are not able to live longer than 1-2 days after falling off of a host, making the risk of spread through a rug or carpet very small, therefore spending much time and money on environmental cleaning is not necessary to avoid reinfestation or spread to others.

## **Preventing Head Lice**

Even though anyone can get head lice, there are several steps that can be taken to prevent and control the spread of head lice including:

- Avoiding head-to-head contact with others/promote avoiding contact to other in children during play and other activities such as sports, slumber parties, etc.
- Do not share belongings such as clothing, coats, brushes, or hair clips with others
- Do not use beds, pillows, stuffed animals etc. that belong to an infested person
- Vacuum the furniture/carpet where the infested person sat or laid.

More information on head lice can be found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/index.html>