



## Norman – Mahanomen Public Health

Despite popular beliefs, schools are not the primary source of lice transmissions. However, it is important to start thinking and being mindful of head lice and how lice is spread. One in every 100 elementary children will be infested with lice yearly. Although lice are pesky parasitic insects, they are harmless and do not cause disease. It is important to remember that head lice do NOT indicate poor hygiene! It is also important to be educated on the louse, tips for prevention, and proper treatment should an infestation occur.



### Life cycle:

- Lice reproduce rapidly, mating every 2-3 hours and lays 5-10 eggs per day.
- The eggs are called nits and are glued to the base of the hair close to the scalp. Viable nits are dark colored and next to the scalp or hair shaft. White nits are harmless and have already hatched. They are empty casings and pose no threat. Nits that are ¼ of inch or more from the scalp have already hatched.
- Head lice survive by feeding on human blood every 2-3 hours.
- A louse cannot live off the human body for more than two days.
- Nits can only survive between 6-20 hours off the human body.
- The total life span of a louse is 23-30 days.
- Lice do not leave their food source on purpose. Transmission occurs from close head to head contact or sharing of personal items, combs, hats etc.

### Signs and Symptoms and Diagnosis:

- Be cautious of misdiagnosis- can result in unnecessary stress and treatment.
- A visualization of live lice on the head may be difficult. Lice move quickly, trying to avoid light. Good lighting is important during inspection of scalps.
- A visualization of nits which are commonly found at the base of the hair shaft along the hairline at the back of the head and neck and around the ears. Viable nits (nits that will hatch) are usually dark grey/black in color.
- Itching of the head due to an allergic reaction to the lice saliva.
- Sores may be visible as a result of continuous itching.
- Irritability and sleeplessness.
- White nits (casing of eggs) that are more than ¼ inch away from the scalp are considered “dead” nits or empty nits, having already hatched.



### How Lice is Spread:

- Direct contact with someone that has lice. “Head to head” contact is the primary mode of transmission. “Sleep-overs” are often a great avenue for sharing head lice.
- Secondary mode is through sharing of personal items such as combs, hats, brushes and pillows.
- More common in children because of their close proximity to each other.
- Head lice cannot fly or jump, direct contact with a louse is required in order to spread.
- Peak infestations are during the summer and back-to-school months.
- Lice cannot reproduce off the body, they will not infest pets, and nits that fall off the head will not hatch or re-attach themselves.

### Prevention:

- Avoid head to head contact during outbreaks
- Discourage children from sharing personal items; hair clips, combs, hats, scarves etc. Clothing or items thought to be exposed to head lice should be washed or put in the dryer for 30 minutes or bagged for 2 weeks.
- Personal care items should be washed in hot water 130 degrees or more for 10 minutes or in a medicated shampoo for 10 minutes.
- Vacuum floors, carpets, and furniture regularly. Remember your automobiles.
- Screen those that may have been exposed to head lice on a regular basis.



### Treatment of Head Lice:

- Over the counter products like Nix, a permethrin-based insecticide shampoo.
- Prescription medications like RID, a pyrethrin-based shampoo
- Alternative treatments such as herbal products or suffocating products like mayonnaise, olive oil, petroleum jelly and margarine.

Re-treatment may need to occur 7-10 days after the first treatment to ensure that all lice and nits are dead. Please note: Nits do not fall off by themselves, even when they are dead. You can also comb the hair with a fine tooth comb and pull each nit out of the hair. This alone is not effective if there are live lice.

Families should check their family members routinely. Frequent head checks at home will help speed up treatment and decrease infestations of more individuals. Do not send children to school knowing they have head lice. This causes several challenges and issues for all parties involved. School Districts have their own policies and procedures in regards to dealing with head lice. Notifying your school will also help early detection and decrease risks of transmission.

For further information or if you need assistance regarding head lice, please contact your health care provider. You may also contact your local public health agency, Norman-Mahnomen Public Health at 218-935-2527 or 218-784-5425. References: Minnesota Department of Health retrieved from <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/headlice/factsheet.html>  
Center for Disease Control retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/>  
National Association School of Nurses retrieved from <http://www.nasn.org/SearchResults?Search=head+lice>