

# Lice Awareness Wednesday

## The No Nit Policy

### A Healthy Standard for Children and their Families

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**The National Pediculosis Association recommends the No Nit Policy as the public health standard intended to keep children lice free, nit free, and in school.**

- Pediculosis capitis is the medical term for an infestation of head lice. It is itself an infectious disease.
  - Head lice are highly communicable parasites specific to humans. They require blood meals to survive and have been associated with various infections including rickettsial diseases.
  - As the threat of old and new communicable diseases emerge, it is critical to set public health standards that not only encourage, but also enable parents to send their children to school lice and nit free.
  - Pediculosis represents one of the most common communicable childhood diseases and whether or not we understand how this has evolved, it is important to acknowledge head lice as a problem when raising or caring for children.
  - The No Nit Policy encourages each family to do its part at home with routine screening, early detection, accurate identification and through removal of lice and nits.
  - Early intervention provides the needed assurance for those who have successfully eliminated an infestation that everything possible is being done to prevent new outbreaks when children return to groups where close contact is inevitable.
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#### **WHY THE CONTROVERSY?**

Opponents of No Nit Policies say that "overzealous" enforcement can lead to inappropriate exclusion of children with residual nits, but whose infestation has otherwise been "treated." Those who judge enforcement to be "overzealous" may not consider the broader public health values and preferences of the community. Few who oppose the No Nit Policies would accept infestations for themselves or for their own children.

Without the No Nit Policy, communities are left with a hit-or-miss approach. Indifference about adopting a standardized management protocol permeates the attitudes of health professionals at every level. This in turn gives way to a maze of conflicting opinions and directives that are counterproductive. Public health policies for head lice cannot be based solely on the use of chemical remedies.

The Food and Drug Administration recommends repeating chemical treatments in 7-10 days because none of the available treatment products are 100% effective against lice eggs and that remaining viable nits will hatch lice. Unfortunately, the FDA's directive does not take into consideration the endemic nature of head lice. Children being managed in this manner can infest others or become reinfested in the interim. Mechanical removal of head lice and nits is less noxious and more likely to be successful than repeated chemical treatments.

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## Strategies That Will Make The No Nit Policy Succeed

- 1. Routine Screening and Early Detection:** Vigilant screening of children for head lice and nits plays a pivotal role in pediculosis management. Early detection offers the best opportunity to manually remove head lice and nits without pesticide exposure. This directive is consistent with traditional preventive medical and communicable disease control methods.
- 2. Manual Removal of All Lice and Nits:** There are no safe pesticides, "natural" or otherwise, scientifically proven to be 100% effective against head lice, nits or nit glue. Reliance on head lice treatment products that are ineffective promotes repeated use of potentially harmful chemicals and contributes to ongoing infestations, outbreaks, and resistant strains of head lice.

### **Manual removal is the safe alternative and necessary component to any head lice treatment regimen.**

- 3. Temporary Dismissal of Children with Head Lice and/or Nits:** Administrators and health personnel must take all reasonable measures to help ensure that infested children do not join the group setting. It is more than fair to expect that uninfested children will be safeguarded while infested children will be cared for with sensitivity. Monitoring with enforcement through scheduled and announced group screenings encourages parental compliance and promotes community cooperation and individual accountability. This does not mean panicked emergency pick-ups. The goal is to avert a crisis mentality by enabling families to keep their children lice and nit free.
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## Head Lice Aren't All Bad News

Head lice provide an early opportunity to teach children responsible personal health behaviors. Children can learn communicable disease prevention concepts in a meaningful way and learn to take responsibility for their actions. It is vital that we build consistent and positive public health messages for children who mature into a world of behavior-related health threats including alcohol, drugs and AIDS.

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## Medical and Social Advantages of the No Nit Policy

- Prevents continuing infestations caused by the surviving and hatching of nits.
  - Maximizes the opportunity to eliminate repeated chemical treatments aimed at killing head lice that hatch from remaining viable nits.
  - Eliminates confusion -- *Were these eggs here before or do they represent a new infestation?*
  - Contributes to improved standards of personal hygiene and self-esteem, protecting children from ridicule and rejection .
  - Enhances uninterrupted class time for the majority of the children and prevents lost days at work that can be costly for parents.
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While absence from school or child care is a loss of educational opportunity and an encumbrance to working parents, readmitting an infested child is not the solution. A policy for head lice must consider not only the infested child, but also his or her peers who have already been successfully deloused or who have not yet been infested. All this considered, the No Nit Policy remains a sensible approach that sets the standard to serve and protect all the children in the group.