



Head Lice Myths and Facts

Definitions

Infestation = having multiple insects present and reproducing, in this case, on a human head

Lice = more than one louse

Louse = small insect that lives on the scalp (singular)

Nits = eggs, dead or alive, of a louse

Parasite = an organism that lives off another, i.e. lice surviving on the blood of humans

Pediculosis = having an infestation of lice

Myth	Fact
<i>It is easy to get lice.</i>	Lice are spread by head-to-head contact and are much harder to get than a cold, the flu, ear infections, pink eye, strep throat or impetigo.
<i>Avoiding lice is important, as they are dirty and spread disease.</i>	Lice do not spread any known disease, nor are they impacted by hygiene.
<i>Head lice are very sturdy creatures and can survive many days off a human head in furniture, linens, or clothing.</i>	Head lice need a blood meal every few hours in addition to the warmth and humidity of the human scalp to survive. When off the human body, in optimal conditions, they cannot survive for more than 24 to 36 hours.
<i>Nits (lice eggs) can fall off a person's head, hatch, and cause another person to get lice.</i>	Nits are glued to the hair shaft by a cement-like substance and are very hard to remove. When a nymph is hatched, it must quickly have the warmth and food source of a head to survive.
<i>Cutting a person's hair will prevent head lice infestations.</i>	The length of a person's hair does not prevent head lice infestations.
<i>You can get head lice from sitting at a desk next to someone who is infested with head lice.</i>	Head lice are spread through direct head-to-head contact. The lice do not hop, jump, or fly, so sitting near someone with head lice does not increase the risk of getting the lice.
<i>Lice are commonly spread throughout schools.</i>	Transmissions in schools are rare. It is more common to get head lice from family members, overnight guests, and playmates who spend a lot of time together.
<i>Lice are commonly spread through hats, helmets, or headphones.</i>	Although the spreading of lice through hats, helmets, or headphones is possible, it is rare. It is more common for transmission to occur from pillows, hairbrushes, or bedding. Transmission primarily occurs through head-to-head contact.

Myth	Fact
<i>Schools and child-care facilities should screen all children for head lice, so everyone can be treated and the spread of head lice will be prevented.</i>	Having regularly scheduled mass screenings does not reduce the incidence of head lice.
<i>“No-nit” policies reduce the risk of head lice in schools and child-care facilities.</i>	Research shows “no-nit” policies do not decrease the number of cases of head lice. They do increase the risk of incorrect diagnosis of head lice, the number of days children are out of school, and negative social stigma associated with head lice. They also may hinder academic performance.
<i>You can get lice from your dog or other pets.</i>	Head lice are specific to humans. You can get human lice only from other humans. You cannot give your pets lice.

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Transmission of Head Lice

Head lice are transmitted by:

- Person-to-person transmission (direct contact) – The majority of transmissions of head lice occur by direct head-to-head contact with an infested person. Most of the time this is a close friend or relative.
- Vector transmission (indirect contact) – This type of transmission may occur through the sharing of bedding, or by using personal items such as combs, brushes, scarves, hair ornaments, or hats of an infested person. Although transmission via indirect contact is possible, it is rare.



Common ways of transmission through head-to-head contact include:

- Slumber parties
- Shared beds
- Sport activities
- Reading circles

Without head-to-head contact, these ways of transmission are highly unlikely:

- School buses
- Hats, helmets, or headphones
- Gym mats
- Sitting at a desk

Anyone can get head lice, but some people are at greater risk than others. Those people include:

- Children between the ages of 3 and 11 years
- Girls are more likely to get head lice than boys, possibly because of their play styles and sharing of personal items.⁵
- People with long or short hair can contract head lice. Although all races can get head lice, studies show that children of African-American descent are less likely to become infested.⁵

Quick Facts

1. Head lice are adept at moving from hair-to-hair because of their specialized “claws.” They **cannot jump, fly, or crawl great distances over hard surfaces.**
2. Head lice **cannot survive long away from a human head.** A nymph or adult louse that falls from its host will perish within a couple days under the most optimal conditions. Louse eggs do not hatch at normal room temperatures; they require the higher temperatures associated with a human body.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Head Lice Epidemiology: <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/epi.html>.