Head Lice in Schools
Guidance for the School Nurse

Integrated Pest Management
IPM is a decision-making process based on prevention, accurate pest identification, evidence-based interventions, record-keeping and evaluation to manage pests effectively while safeguarding human and environmental health. Although head lice do not transmit disease they can affect student health due to discomfort, sleep disturbance, and secondary infection, which can impact academic performance. Schools can and should adopt IPM policies and protocols for prevention and management that focus on education, communication.

Managing Head Lice at School
- Head lice are mostly spread through direct head-to-head contact. Indirect spread through contact with personal belongings (combs, brushes, hats) is much less likely to occur. Head lice are very unlikely to be spread through contact with furniture, rugs or other surfaces previously occupied by an infested person.
- The major focus of control activities should be to reduce the number of lice on the head and to lessen the risks of head-to-head contact.
- Do not use sprays or fogs; they are not necessary to control head lice and can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.
- School personnel involved in detection of head lice infestation should be appropriately trained. The importance of correctly diagnosing a head lice infestation should be emphasized.
- Teachers may be the first to notice evidence of head lice but should refer the student to the school nurse or other trained staff member to confirm the diagnosis.
- The American Association of Pediatrics and the US CDC recommend against mass screening of students.

The School Nurse’s Role
School nurses play a critical role in diagnosing and educating about head lice. They can train other staff to accurately diagnose head lice infestations. Nurses also play an important leadership role in advocating for effective evidence-based policies and protocols for prevention and management of head lice in schools and at home.
- Advocate for a more progressive policy if school still has a ‘no-nit’ policy.
- At the beginning of the school year, or during a head lice ‘outbreak’, inform parents of school head lice policies and provide information on effective strategies for prevention and control of head lice.
- If needed, designate and train other school staff how to accurately diagnose head lice infestations.
- After diagnosis allow the student to return to class and remain in school. Notify parents/caregivers at the end of school day.
- Screen known contacts in the school, utilizing discretion and maintaining confidentiality.
- Do not report cases to youth / social services.
- Do not bag clothing.
- Keep records of each diagnosis, noting student’s name, classroom, date reported and action taken by school staff. Records can help to continuously improve policies and protocols.
- Review additional training resources at stopschool-pests.org.

Educate Parents and Students
- Provide parents with guidance for effective management of head lice.
- Advise parents to use a fine-toothed comb to remove lice and nits. Applying hair conditioner first can make it easier. Over-the-counter lice-killing shampoos, used according to directions, may be helpful but combing may still be needed, especially if lice are resistant to the active ingredients in the shampoos.
- Educate students about the importance of avoiding head-to-head contact.

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Head lice (Pediculus humanus capitis) live on the human scalp and feed exclusively on human blood which can result in itching, irritability, and sores on the head. They are spread primarily through head-to-head contact. An estimated 6 million to 12 million infestations of head lice among children 3 to 11 years of age occur each year in the United States. Integrated pest management (IPM) is a smart and sensible approach to managing pests.

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Head Lice School Response Action Chart

Nits or crawling lice found on scalp/hair.

Yes

Compare samples to reference images.

Yes

Notify parent of diagnosis. Provide parents with information on effective head lice management strategies. Return student to class for remainder of school day. Recommend follow-up by pediatrician.

No

Relax. No action needed.

No

Periodically reinspect hair for live lice and nits. No other action needed.

No

Periodically recheck. Any live lice found?

Yes

Apply conditioner to hair. Comb thoroughly. Repeat as needed. If desired, apply non-prescription shampoo following label directions.

No

Consult physician about prescription treatment options.

Yes

Consult physician about prescription treatment options.

Follow up with parents as to diagnosis and treatment.

Use Integrated Pest Management

- Prepare: Develop and implement an action plan including protocols for communication, intervention, record-keeping and training.
- Identify: Ensure nursing or other designated staff can accurately diagnose active head lice infestations.
- Maintain records. Keep a log of sightings, dates and actions taken.
- Do NOT apply pesticides to classrooms and buses for head lice.
- Provide parents with information on effective strategies for managing head lice and preventing recurrence.

Resources

1. American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP): [http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/135/5/e1355.full.pdf](http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/135/5/e1355.full.pdf)
5. Harvard School of Public Health: [https://www.health.harvard.edu/diseases-and-conditions/head-lice](https://www.health.harvard.edu/diseases-and-conditions/head-lice)

Treatment Options for Head Lice

Is hair readily combed with a louse comb?

No

Apply non-prescription lice-killing shampoo following label instructions. (*note: most products require two applications 7-10 days apart*)

Yes

Apply conditioner to hair. Comb thoroughly. Repeat as needed. If desired, apply non-prescription shampoo following label directions.

Periodically recheck. Any live lice found?

Yes

Consult physician about prescription treatment options.

No

Repeat non-prescription shampoo treatment and/or repeat combing with louse comb as needed.

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