

ALLEGAN COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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Office Administration

(269) 673-5411

Bioterrorism Preparedness

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Personal Health

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Communicable Disease

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Environmental Health

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Resource Recovery

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Head Lice

What are Head Lice?

Head lice are tiny insects, about the size of a sesame seed, that live on the scalp and feed by sucking blood. Head lice may turn colors from white, tan, or grey to dark brown or red when they are filled with blood. After the female louse mates, she lays eggs. The eggs, called nits, are easier to see than the lice themselves and are usually found attached to hair shafts close to the scalp behind the ears and on the back of the neck.

How is Head Lice spread?

Head lice is spread by head-to-head contact; or by sharing of personal items such as combs, brushes, scarves, hats, headphones, sleeping bags, bedding, and stuffed animals. Head lice cannot jump and cannot live more than 48 hours off of the head.

What are the symptoms?

Itching, especially around the ears and the back of the neck. Head lice do not cause disease, but infection may develop at scratch sites.

How are they treated?

All household members should be checked for head lice. Over-the-counter treatment products containing permethrin 1% are recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics for head lice in newly diagnosed cases. Follow directions carefully. Re-treat according to manufacturers recommendations, usually 7-10 days after initial treatment if newly hatched lice are found. After lice treatment, the nits (eggs) should be removed with a fine tooth comb.

What else should be done?

Machine wash (hot water) all items used two days before lice were discovered (towels, sheets, pillow cases, clothes, cloth toys, OR machine dry in hot clothes dryer for at least 30 minutes. Head lice and nits can be killed at below-freezing temperatures for 24 hours, or by sealing articles in a plastic bag for 14 days at room temperature. Combs and brushes can be cleaned by soaking in boiling hot water for 10 minutes or by soaking in Lysol, rubbing alcohol, or lice shampoo for one hour. Vacuum bare mattresses, couches, chairs, floors, pillows, carpeting, and car upholstery.

When is it OK to return to school?

Children may return to school after proper treatment has been given and they are louse free. If nits are present, a child may stay in school for the day but should have nits removed or be retreated (as necessary) before returning to school the next day.

This fact sheet is not intended to replace the advice of your physician. Parents should contact their healthcare provider if they have concerns regarding their child's health. If you have general questions, you may contact an Allegan County Public Health Nurse at 269-673-5411.