

[The Parents Guide to Head Lice: Prevention and Treatment](#)

Published Tuesday Aug 31, 2010



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Head lice is often a conversational piece among parents and teachers, though despite the commonality of the subject, there is a lot that many people don't know about the topic, and there are a lot of misconceptions. Though they do not spread disease and are not dangerous, head lice, popularly known as cooties, are dreaded because they are very contagious and bothersome. The complaints usually associated with head lice are a crawling sensation, tickling and itching of the scalp, and loss of sleep. Persistent scratching can cause the skin to become raw and irritated and the nearby lymph glands can also be swollen.

So what exactly are head lice?

They are small, wingless insects that live on the human scalp, attaching themselves to the shafts of hair. Lice eggs, known as nits, which appear as little white to yellow dots on the scalp, are more common than actual lice. Once hatched, they look like sesame seeds. Lice are more common in girls than boys, are most prevalent from ages 3 to 12 years old and some children are more susceptible to head lice than others, regardless of hygiene and socioeconomic status. This is contrary to the popular belief that those with lice are dirty or poor-lice actually prefer clean hair! Head lice are often over diagnosed in schools so be sure your child does indeed have lice before beginning any treatments by examining your child's scalp and hair, section by section. If you suspect that your child has lice, see your practitioner.

There are different treatment methods, ranging from conventional to home care. Conventional treatment includes pediculicides-lice medicines-which are available as shampoos, creams, and lotions. There are a variety of over-the-counter and prescription medications that include Pyrethrin, Permethrin, Lindane, and Malathion. All have side effects. Lindane can cause rash, hair loss, itching, headache, seizures, and even death. Malathion (Ovide) is poisonous to the brain, immune system, and may cause cancer. Never use lice medication on children less than two years old.

Many parents prefer to use home treatment, not only because some strands of lice are now resistant to standard brand medicine, but also because of its more natural, gentle, and non-toxic approach. Grooming is considered an effective way to eliminate lice. Home treatment includes using a fine-tooth comb (preferably

a nit comb) to remove the nits, along with a magnifying glass and proper lighting. While this is also time-consuming, there are no side effects! Wet the hair (as it is easier to remove the lice when hair is wet) and comb towards the scalp, against the hair grain. Make sure to clean comb after each use and do this daily for several nights, then reducing it to every three nights as needed.

Check other family members for lice, and treat immediately as needed. Here are 5 important tips to be aware of when dealing with lice:

- Encourage your child to avoid sharing hats, hairbrushes, and other personal items.

Traditionally, some parents shave the head of a child infested with lice. Although it may make it more difficult for lice to find a warm, comfortable spot, and easier for parents to search for lice, this may draw unwanted attention to the child.

- Vacuum carpets and upholstery in the house and the car. Discard combs, brushes, and barrettes, or wash them in hot water for 20 minutes and then soak in rubbing alcohol for one hour.
- Machine-wash linens, bedding, and clothing in hot water. Place in a hot dryer cycle for 30 minutes. Dry-clean stuffed animals or put away in an airtight plastic bag for three weeks.

Oil can be helpful in eliminating lice by covering and suffocating them. Coat the entire scalp and hair with olive oil or mayonnaise after combing out the nits. Cover the head with a shower cap or towel and leave on for at least two hours. (I would recommend leaving it on for 6-8 hours.) Shampoo the hair, which may take several washings. Examine the scalp and remove any existing nits. Repeat every four days, as needed, for three weeks.

In a study from the Israel Medical Association Journal, a natural head lice remedy with essential oils proved very effective in controlling head lice without serious side effects. The remedy, which contained coconut oil, anise oil, and ylang ylang oil was applied every five days on three occasions. There are commercially prepared essential oil treatments containing lavender, lemon, rosemary, tea tree, and other oils that may be effective.

About Dr. Lauren Feder: Known for her holistically minded approach and combining the ‘best of both worlds,’ Dr. Feder is a frequent lecturer for parents and professionals and is the author of Natural Baby and Childcare and The Parents’ Concise Guide to Childhood Vaccinations.

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HealthCare Review

(New England edition : online)

ISSN 1554-8155



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