

“Only dirty people get head lice.”

“Head lice can fly from head to head.”

“Mayonnaise will get rid of head lice.”

“Head lice can make you sick.”

There are many misconceptions about head lice, which have stigmatized the condition and cause unnecessary anxiety and distress for affected families.¹

Here are some common myths about head lice and the real truth about this condition.

Myth: Only dirty people get head lice.

Fact: Personal hygiene or cleanliness at home or in school has nothing to do with getting head lice. They are “equal-opportunity” parasites.²

Myth: Head lice carry diseases.

Fact: Head lice don’t spread disease.²

Myth: Lice can hop or fly from one person to another.

Fact: Lice are wingless insects and cannot fly or hop. They move by crawling and are spread most often by direct head-to-head contact with an infested person.²

Myth: It’s easy to get lice by sharing hair brushes, clothing and other personal items.

Fact: It’s uncommon for head lice to be spread by contact with the belongings of an infested person. Occasionally lice may crawl or nits (eggs) that were attached to hair that has fallen out may hatch on these items, so it’s not a bad idea to avoid sharing personal items like brushes, hair accessories, clothing, towels and pillows to help prevent the spread of head lice.^{2,3}

Myth: Head lice can live anywhere.

Fact: It’s very unlikely to find head lice in items like helmets or headphones because their feet are specially adapted for holding onto human hair and don’t attach firmly to smooth or slippery surfaces.²

In general, it’s unlikely to find head lice anywhere except on a person’s head. They can’t survive long without feeding and will die within one to two days if they aren’t attached to a human. Nits can’t hatch and usually die within a week if they aren’t kept at the same temperature as that found close to the scalp.³

Myth: Swimming pools can spread lice.

Fact: Although head lice are not killed by the chlorine levels found in swimming pools and can survive under water for several hours, they are unlikely to be spread by the water in a swimming pool. Head lice appear to hold tightly to human hair when under water.²

Myth: You can get head lice from pets.

Fact: Head lice are not spread by dogs, cats or any other pets.²

Myth: “Nits” and “head lice” mean the same thing.

Nits are lice eggs laid by the adult female head louse at the base of the hair shaft near the scalp. They are tiny, oval shaped, usually yellow or white, and often confused with dandruff or other dirt. Nits also include hatched or empty eggs. Adult head lice are six-legged insects about the size of a sesame seed and are tan to grayish-white.²

Myth: If your head isn't itchy, you don't have lice.

Fact: Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to louse bites, may take four to six weeks to appear the first time a person has head lice. Other symptoms to look out for include a tickling feeling or a sensation of something moving in the hair; irritability and sleeplessness; and sores on the head caused by scratching.⁴

Myth: If one person in a household has lice, everyone needs to get treated.

Fact: Although everyone in the same household as an infested person should be checked for head lice, treatment is recommended only for those who are actively infested.⁵

Myth: You can use home remedies like mayonnaise to get rid of head lice.

Fact: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there is no clear scientific evidence that home remedies such as mayonnaise or olive oil are effective treatments for head lice.⁶

Myth: If a family member has head lice, the entire house should be cleaned and fumigated.

Fact: Because head lice can't live for long without a human host, it's not necessary to spend a lot of time and money on special house cleaning measures to get rid of a head lice infestation. Fumigant sprays and fogs should not be used as they can be toxic and are unnecessary in controlling head lice.⁵

Routine house cleaning of items that have been in contact with the head of the infested person in the 48 hours before treatment is sufficient to help avoid reinfestation. Vacuum items such as carpeting and furniture, and machine wash and dry items worn or used by the infested person using the hot water and hot air cycles. Items that can't be machine washed can be dry cleaned.⁵

References

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- ⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Parasites: Lice: Head Lice: General Information: Treatment Frequently Asked Questions. http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/gen_info/faqs_treat.html. Accessed June 19, 2012.