

HEAD LICE, DON'T NEED TO NIT-PICK!

by Gregg Rockower, MD

Head Lice is not a problem of the “dirty and poor” nor is it a health hazard. As many as 12 million US schoolchildren are affected each year. Lice feed on the human scalp and they are spread from person to person by head-to-head contact, shared bedding, hats, and combs. Lice do not fly or jump and pets play no role in the transmission. Head lice usually survive less than 1 day when away from a human scalp.

The diagnosis of head lice can be tricky and should be made by an experienced professional to identify lice and nits. Stray insects, hair gels, and dandruff are commonly misdiagnosed as head lice. Once diagnosed, treat as soon as possible with the safest, most effective, and least expensive choice. Since classroom spread is extremely low, there is no reason for a child to miss school.

The most effective nonprescription treatment is **1% Permethrin (NIX)**. It should be applied as a cream rinse and left in place for at least 20 minutes. We often recommend wearing a shower cap and leaving it on overnight. A second application should be applied 7-10 days later, ideally on day 9. (*RID* is a slightly less effective alternative, used the same as *NIX*.) It is unnecessary to treat the entire family unless live lice or live eggs (within 1 cm from the scalp) are found or if they share a bed with someone who is infested.

Then try to remove the nits. Don't apply vinegar or products to breakdown the glue as they decrease the effectiveness of the *Permethrin*, so they are no longer recommended. Wet combing with a specially designed nit comb should be adequate. The goal is to remove enough nits to make ongoing nit checking easier and to decrease the worry upon return to school. **The “No-Nit” policy should be completely abandoned.**

Finally, wash all if the linens and clothes in hot water for at least 10 minutes. Dry cleaning is also effective. Pillows, stuffed animals, hair accessories, or other items that cannot be washed should be placed in a bag and put aside for 2 weeks. Furniture and car seats can be vacuumed.

If nonprescription treatment fails, there are prescription medications that may be more effective. *Malathione (Ovide)* as a single overnight treatment applied to a dry scalp has been shown to be the most effective. It is flammable, so avoid using flat irons, curling irons, or blow driers when using this product. Newer products like *Ivermectin (Sklice)* or *Spinosad (Natroba)* are additional treatment options

Non-medicinal treatments such as petroleum jelly, mayonnaise, butter, herbal oils, and olive oil sometimes work, but watch for relapse due to a high failure rate. Professional nit pickers and treatment with hot air (*AirAlle*) are also reasonable alternatives, but they are time consuming and expensive.

While *head lice* are a nuisance, **they do not cause more than an itchy scalp** and they are treatable. Make sure your child is diagnosed correctly and returns to school as soon as possible!



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