

How to Get Rid of Head Lice (Yes, Even Drug-Resistant Lice)

The start of the school year brings memories of school supplies, reuniting with friends, and the ever looming head check for lice. I can still remember my mom sitting in the bathroom with my sister and me picking out our nits. In my more modern version, there would be a nice glass of red wine to accompany the scene. I digress...

With the new school year comes a new lice-related challenge: The American Chemical Society is [reporting](#) that at least 25 states predominantly have had incidents of lice resistant to permethrin, the drug in over-the-counter products typically used to treat it. But fear not, we are not all doomed to live with lice forever. There are other treatment options. Let's start with discussing what lice is and how it can be treated.

What is Head Lice?

[Head lice](#) is a common condition caused by infestation of the scalp with *Pediculus humanus capitis* (or, more simply put, the human head louse). While head lice are not dangerous and do not spread diseases, they can very itchy and uncomfortable. The head louse is a tiny gray-white insect. The female head louse lives for about one month but can lay 7 to 10 eggs per day. The eggs are called nits. The eggs attach to the base of the hair near the scalp and hatch in about eight days.

How Do Children Catch Head Lice?

Head lice is spread through direct person to person contact. Despite what you may hear, head lice do not fly or jump and cannot be spread from person to person via pets. Typically, lice is spread through direct contact with the infected person's hair. It can also be spread by contact with brushes, clothing, bedding, and combs.

What are the Symptoms of Head Lice?

Many people with head lice do not have symptoms, which is why many school administrators choose to have students regularly checked for lice. When symptoms occur, they can include itching and skin irritation of the scalp, neck, and ears. Head lice are diagnosed by direct examination of the hair for lice and nits.

How do You Get Rid of Head Lice?

1. Medication

Until now, lice was typically treated with over-the-counter permethrin-containing products. But, in cases where the lice is resistant to OTC treatments (like the strain currently in the news), there are a variety of prescription medications, such as topical Benzyl alcohol, spinosad, and ivermectin, that continue to be very effective against head lice. It is important to follow the directions very carefully. Some of these medications will require a second treatment 7 to 10 days later because some lice may survive the first treatment.

2. Wet combing

You can avoid insecticides if you go with this option, however, it's a very time-consuming process. Wet-combing involves wetting the hair and adding a lubricant, such as conditioner or olive oil. You then comb through the hair diligently for 15 to 30 minutes, removing all lice and nits. This process needs to be repeated every three to four days for two weeks after you see any adult lice. In some cities, you can hire a professional lice checker to perform this treatment for you.

How Do You Get Rid of Lice on Bedding, Clothing & Toys?

Whether treated with topical medications or wet combing, all clothing, bedding, towels, and stuffed animals should be washed in hot water and dried in an electric drier on the hot setting. Dry cleaning is also effective. Any item that can't be washed should be sealed in a plastic bag for two weeks.

How Do You Prevent Lice?

Talk to your children about not sharing hair ties, brushes, combs, and hats. There are also natural [lice-repelling shampoos and sprays](#) that you can use with tree oil; there's no medical proof that they actually work, but they're not harmful to your child and they may help prevent head lice.