



## Hawaii State Department of Health

### Disease Investigation Branch

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## Head Lice

(“ukus”)

### What are head lice?

Head lice are small (the size of a sesame seed), usually tan to grayish-white colored insects that live and reproduce in the hair on human heads. Head lice feed on human blood and do not survive very long (usually less than 1-2 days) when not on a person.

Head lice are not a health hazard and are not responsible for the spread of any disease.

### What are “nits”?

“Nits” are the eggs and empty egg casings of head lice. They are about 1 to 2 mm long and are firmly attached to the hair close to the scalp. The eggs typically hatch in 8 to 9 days, then pass through 3 stages (over 9 to 12 days) before becoming full-sized adults. A mature female can lay up to 10 eggs per day. Note that nits cannot hatch and usually die within a week if they are not kept at the same temperature as that found close to the scalp.

### How do you get them?

The most common way to get head lice is head-to-head contact with someone already infested. Head lice move by crawling; they cannot hop or fly from one person to another.

Indirect spread through contact with personal belongings of an infested person (combs, brushes, hats) is much less likely, but may occur rarely.

Infestations are most common among preschool and elementary school-aged children as well as the household members of infested children. Personal hygiene or cleanliness in the home or school has nothing to do with getting head lice.

### What are the symptoms of head lice?

- Tickling feeling of something moving in the hair
- Itching, caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of the head louse

- Irritability and difficulty sleeping; head lice are most active in the dark
- Sores on the head caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected with bacteria found on the person’s skin.

### For how long is a person contagious?

A person is contagious as long as they have live lice in their hair.

### What is the treatment for head lice?

Treatment is recommended for persons diagnosed with an active infestation. Both over-the-counter and prescription medications are available for the treatment of head lice.

### How do you keep from getting it?

Reduce the risk of catching head lice by avoiding both direct head-to-head contact and sharing of clothing or items such as hats, hair ribbons, brushes, towels, etc.

### Should a student with head lice be sent home from school?

Students with live head lice do not need to be sent home early from school. “No-nit” policies that require a child to be free of nits before they can return to school should be discontinued. Instead, a student should finish the school day, receive appropriate treatment, and then return to school. No healthy child should be excluded from or allowed to miss school time because of head lice.

For more information, see the CDC’s website at <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/head/index.html>