



OFFICE OF  
SCHOOL HEALTH

**Pediculosis (head lice, body lice, pubic lice, cooties, crabs)**

**What is pediculosis?** Pediculosis is an infection with adult or larval lice or their eggs (nits). The crawling stages of this insect feed on human blood, which can result in severe itching. Head lice are usually located on the scalp and pubic lice (crabs) are found in the pubic area. Body lice live along the seams of clothing and travel to the skin to feed.

**Who gets pediculosis?** Anyone can get lice.

**How is pediculosis spread?**

For both head lice and body lice, transmission can occur during direct contact with an infected individual or with objects used by them, such as hats, clothing and combs or brushes. While other means are possible, crab lice are most often transmitted through sexual contact.

**What are the symptoms of pediculosis?**

Usually, the first indication of an infection is itching or scratching in the area of the body where the lice feed. Scratching at the back of the head or around the ears should lead to an examination for head lice. Itching around the genital area should lead to an examination for crab lice or their eggs.

**How soon after infection do symptoms appear?**

It may take as long as 2 to 3 weeks or longer for a person to notice the intense itching associated with lice infection.

**For how long is a person able to spread pediculosis?**

Pediculosis can be spread for as long as lice or eggs remain alive on the infected person or clothing.

**What is the treatment for pediculosis?**

Several medicated shampoos or cream rinses are effective at killing lice. Products containing permethrin or pyrethrins are available over-the-counter. To avoid side effects and toxicity, dose and duration of treatment should be followed according to label instructions. Retreatment after 7 to 10 days is usually recommended to assure that no eggs have survived. Nit combs are available to help remove nits from hair.

**How can pediculosis be prevented?**

Physical contact with infested individuals and their belongings, especially clothing, headgear and bedding should be avoided. Health education should focus on proper methods of detection and treatment. To prevent re-infection following treatment, clothing and bedding should be laundered in hot water (140 degrees F for 20 minutes) followed by a hot drying cycle to destroy lice and eggs. Since lice eggs hatch within 6 - 10 days, and lice can survive for only 1 - 2 days away from a scalp, storing infested items in a sealed plastic bag for 10 days is effective for items that cannot be laundered.

**Can a child with pediculosis remain in school?**

**No.** New York City schools enforce a "no head lice" policy. Following treatment, a child must be free of lice before returning to school.

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