Head Lice: The Basics

* Head lice are very common and can affect people of any socioeconomic background and ethnicity. They do not imply a lack of hygiene or cleanliness of the infested person. More than 12 million people, mostly children and school personnel, get head lice each year.
* Direct head-to-head contact with an infested person is the main way head lice are transmitted, but they may also be transmitted by sharing hats, scarves, headphones, combs and other hair accessories. Lice cannot hop, jump, or fly, but they can crawl rapidly.
* Signs of head lice: frequent head scratching; complaints of itchy scalp/head; redness behind ears or on the back of the neck; identification of nits or crawling lice.
* The best and safest treatment for head lice is manual removal (See “Tips for Manual Removal” below).
* If a lice shampoo is warranted, ask your doctor or pharmacist for specifics on the product and follow all label instructions exactly. Misapplications can be ineffective and dangerous as well.

Figure 1: Head Louse (Pediculus capitis)

* Head lice are small, wingless parasitic insects. They are typically 1/6 - 1/8 inch long, brownish in color with darker margins. The claws on the end of each of their six legs are well adapted to grasping a hair strand.
* Female head lice glue their grayish-white to brown eggs (nits) securely to hair shafts. The eggs are resistant to pesticides, and they are difficult to remove without a special ‘nit-comb.’ The nits are generally near the scalp, but they may be found anywhere on the hair shaft.

Figure 2: Actual size of the three lice forms compared to a penny (Photo cred: CDC)

**Tips for Manual Removal:**

1. Work in a well-lighted area or use a flashlight and hand lens.

2. Use a grooming comb or hairbrush to re move tangles. A hair detangler spray or other hair conditioner may aid in this process.

3. Divide the hair into sections and fasten off the hair that is not being worked on.

4. Use a lice comb to detect and remove lice and nits. See figure 1 and figure 2 in this brochure.

5. Go through hair sections from the scalp to the end of the hair. Nits are usually found close to the scalp.

6. Dip the comb in a cup of hot, soapy water or use tape to remove lice, nits or debris from the comb.

7. Sift through the same section of hair and look for attached nits and live lice.

8. Move on to the next section until the entire scalp and all hair has been checked.

9. Screen the infested person every day for 10 days and regularly thereafter.

10. If additional nits (at least 3-5 per day) are discovered, another manual search is recommended.

* Pesticide sprays do little or nothing to control lice. Never treat your home, car, furniture, beds, pillows, or clothing with pesticides (e.g. ‘lice bombs,’ flea bobs, sprays, etc.) in an attempt to control head lice. You will expose yourself and your family to unnecessary pesticide risk.
* To kill lice on bedding, clothes, etc., wash and dry them as you would ordinarily. NEVER add any pesticide. Vacuum materials that cannot be washed.
* If you are concerned about head lice on carpets or furniture, vacuum them thoroughly or wipe smooth surfaces with a damp cloth.