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Are Lice Contagious?

Lice are highly contagious and can spread quickly from person to person, especially in group settings (schools, child-care centers, slumber parties, sports activities, camps, and even playgrounds).

Though they can't fly or jump, these tiny parasites have specially adapted claws that allow them to crawl and cling firmly to hair. They spread mainly through head-to-head contact, but sharing clothing, bed linens, combs, brushes, and hats can also help pass them along. Children and teens are most prone to catching lice because they tend to have close physical contact with each other and often share personal items.

How Are Lice Treated?

Your child's doctor can recommend a medicated shampoo, cream, or lotion to kill the lice. These may be over-the-counter or prescription medications, depending on what treatments have already been tried. It isn't uncommon for treatments to be unsuccessful because of incorrect use or because the lice may be resistant to the chemical in the shampoo.

It's important to follow the directions exactly because these products are insecticides. Applying these medications too much or too frequently can increase the risk of causing harm. Following the directions on the product label is also important to ensure that the treatment works properly. Your child's doctor may also suggest a special rinse to use on your child's hair that makes it easier to comb out the nits using a fine-tooth comb.

Can Lice Be Prevented?

Having head lice is **not** a sign of uncleanness or poor hygiene. The pesky little bugs can be a problem for kids of all ages and socioeconomic levels, no matter how often they do - or don't - clean their hair or bathe.

Lice are common, especially in children. While no records are kept for accurate counts, some estimates are that as many as 10-15 million persons annually develop head lice in the United States. To prevent outbreaks of head lice:

- Watch for signs of head lice, such as frequent head scratching.
- Don't share combs, brushes, hats, or other personal items with people who may have lice.
- Avoid close personal contact with people who may have lice.
- If you or your children have head lice, thoroughly wash and dry combs, brushes, hats, clothing, bedding, and stuffed animals, and vacuum carpeting and car seats.
- If your children get head lice, notify their school, camp, daycare provider, and their friends' parents.
- Check all family members for lice and eggs at least once a week.