

Don't lose your head over lice

It can cause panic for parents, but it doesn't have to.

Emily Isom is talking about head lice, something she sees often as a mother and a certified medical assistant in pediatrics at OSF HealthCare.

The good news for parents: in most cases, your child doesn't have to miss school and can be treated with over-the-counter remedies.

Lice basics

Isom says lice (the singular form is louse) are tiny insects that sit on your scalp. They typically spread when you share objects like a comb or hat or when you have head-to-head contact with someone. Itchiness is the primary symptom, and the infestation usually lasts seven to 10 days.

"If someone ignores it, it can lead to infections and open sores," Isom warns. "The insects are going to keep biting the same spot, and the person is going to keep scratching the spot."

The lice can also lay eggs and multiply, Isom says.

Isom suggests parents and teachers be vigilant about lice. Check your child when they get home from school or anytime you notice they are scratching their head excessively. Use a fine-toothed comb and a magnifying glass to look for sores, bleeding, pus and the insects themselves or their eggs. The eggs are called nits and are white in color.

"For girls with long hair, it can take a long time," Isom says with a smirk. "Start at the scalp and go down to get the nits and lice onto the comb. Clean the comb, and go back through another section."

Treatment and prevention

You can take your child to their pediatrician if you feel it's needed. But for a mild first case of lice, Isom says over-the-counter products at home, like the Nix® or Rid® treatment kits, may do the trick. If your child isn't getting better, has a *repeat* infection or has significant symptoms, definitely talk to your pediatrician or an urgent care. They may advise a virtual visit so lice don't spread. Isom says she often sees doctors prescribe Natroba™, a shampoo that kills lice.

For prevention, keeping a clean home goes a long way.

If you already have a case of lice in your home: "Spray the couches, bedding and floors with sprays that are for lice. You have to vacuum. You have to bag every stuffed animal for at least two weeks to suffocate the lice. Take the sheets off the bed every day and dry them on high heat until you know the lice are gone," Isom says. Stray clothing should also be dried on high heat.

All that work may lead you to believe that kids with lice should be isolated for a while. Not so, Isom says.

The [United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) says if a child has lice, they don't need to leave school early. Once they start treatment, they can return to school. Isom suggests checking with your child's school to see how it handles lice.

Misconceptions

There's a lot people get wrong about lice, Isom says.

- They're the result of poor hygiene.

Isom says that can play a role, and she recommends you wash your hair daily (Fairy Tales is a good shampoo brand for kids, she says.) But, Isom says *anyone* can get lice.

"Dirty hair or clean hair. Lice can go to both," she says. "But if you have dirty hair, lice won't like that. With clean hair, there are no oils and buildups of hair products. The lice can more easily attach themselves."

- Lice can jump from person to person.

No, they typically spread from sharing items or close contact.

- I need to call an exterminator.

Not needed, Isom says. A thorough cleaning of your home should be fine.

- I heard that an at-home remedy like an essential oil will work.

"Stick to what's proven," Isom says, referring to over-the-counter or prescription products. She's even heard of some people putting flammable material in their hair, an obvious risk for a fire.

- Lice carry diseases.

Isom reiterates that constant scratching can lead to wounds and infections. But she says lice are not like the flu or COVID-19.

"It's a pest," she says.