

Understanding Head Lice

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny, wingless, tan/brown insects that live and breed in human hair. They are about the size of a sesame seed. The eggs, called nits, are easier to see than the lice themselves. The nits are yellowish-white; teardrop shaped, and are firmly attached at an angle to the hair shaft close to the scalp behind the ears and on the back of the neck. Dandruff, lint, and hair spray globules can easily be brushed from hair and can be mistaken for nits. Unlike dandruff, nits are difficult to remove and cannot be brushed away. Lice crawl slowly and cannot crawl long distances. **They do not fly, hop, or jump.** They survive by piercing the skin to feed on blood. Skin irritation at the feeding site causes itching. While head lice is a nuisance, it does not pose a significant health hazard and they are not known to spread disease.

How do lice spread?

Lice are primarily spread by direct hair-to-hair contact, and less frequently through shared items such as combs, brushes, scarves, hats, headphones, sleeping bags, and stuffed animals. Lice may also be transmitted through shared bedding such as pillows, pillowcases, sheets, and blankets. Lice cannot survive away from the head for more than 24-48 hours. However, the nits can survive off the body for a week or more but in order to survive they must get back on the head soon after they hatch. You cannot catch head lice from or give them to pets.

How do you prevent head lice?

- Teach children not to share combs, brushes, hats, and coats.
- Do not try on other people's hats (not even in department stores).
- Teach children to hang coats separately – placing hats and scarves inside coat sleeves.
- Check your child's hair if he/she itches or complains about itching.
- Getting rid of lice as soon as they are found can prevent them from spreading in your home.

How are lice detected?

The first clue that a child has head lice is frequent scratching of the scalp. To check for infestations, carefully examine the hair around the back of the neck and behind the ears. Since head lice shy away from light, you may only see the eggs (nits), small whitish ovals of uniform size (teardrop shape) attached to the hair shaft.

How are lice treated?

Successful treatment needs to concentrate on removing/killing lice on the child and on the removal of the nits.

Several products are available to treat head lice. These are either shampoos or cream rinses. Some can be purchased over-the-counter while others

need a prescription. These shampoos and rinses should not be used on infants because the medicine is absorbed through the skin and can affect the brain.

It is important to follow the instructions on the label exactly as they are written. Many of the treatments must be applied to dry hair to be effective. After the initial treatment, comb or pick out all the nits with a fine tooth nit comb. Combing should be repeated daily until no lice or nits are seen. A second treatment is recommended 7-10 days after the initial treatment. Only those family members with lice or nits should be treated.

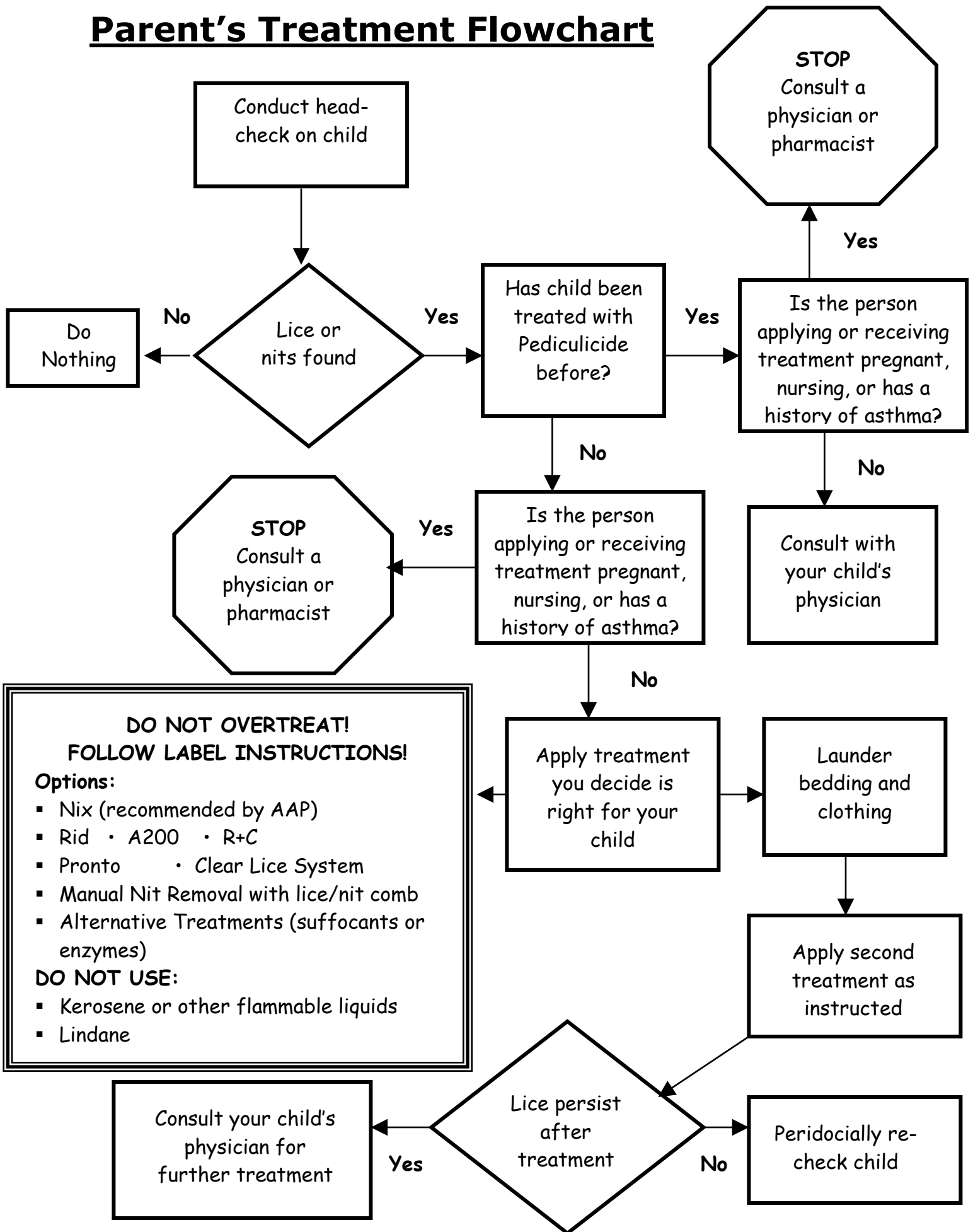
Do not use a cream rinse, combination shampoo/conditioner, or conditioner before using lice medicine. Do not re-wash the hair for 1-2 days after the lice medicine is removed.

How to treat the environment

- Checking everyone in the household at the same time, prior to cleaning the environment.
- Washing clothing and bed linens in hot water. Items should be washed for at least 10 minutes at a water temperature of 130-140°F. Dry items on high heat for at least 30 minutes.
- Vacuuming your upholstered furniture, carpet, floors, stuffed animals, coat collars, hats, bare mattresses, car upholstery, and child car seats. Soaking your combs, brushes, and hair accessories in boiling water for 10 minutes. If items cannot be exposed to heat, soak them in Lysol, rubbing alcohol or a pediculicide for one hour.
- Items that cannot be washed or vacuumed, such as stuffed animals, can be placed in a tightly closed plastic bag for 14 days at room temperature or 24 hours in below freezing temperatures.
- All of the above tasks should be completed on the same day for increased success in eliminating head lice.

Spraying or fogging a home with insecticides or pediculicides is NOT RECOMMENDED and may be harmful if used in a poorly ventilated area.

Parent's Treatment Flowchart



**DO NOT OVERTREAT!
FOLLOW LABEL INSTRUCTIONS!**

Options:

- Nix (recommended by AAP)
- Rid • A200 • R+C
- Pronto • Clear Lice System
- Manual Nit Removal with lice/nit comb
- Alternative Treatments (suffocants or enzymes)

DO NOT USE:

- Kerosene or other flammable liquids
- Lindane

10 Steps to Keep Ahead of Head Lice

- 1)** Watch for signs of head lice, such as frequent head scratching. Anyone can get lice, mainly from direct head-to-head contact, sharing hats, brushes, etc.
- 2)** Check all family members for lice and nits (lice eggs) at least once a week.
- 3)** Be sure not to confuse nits with hair debris, (i.e. dandruff, hair spray droplets or hair casts). Nits are yellowish-white, oval shaped and are attached at an angle to the side of the hair shaft.
- 4)** Consult a pharmacist or physician before applying pesticides or other lice treatments if anyone involved is pregnant or nursing, has allergies, asthma, or has nits in the eyebrows or lashes. Never use a pesticide or lice treatment on or near the eyes.
- 5)** Consider all of your treatment options. Remember, lice-killing products are pesticides and must be used with caution. If you choose alternative methods, they may not have been studied thoroughly enough to determine long-term outcomes. The only completely safe alternative is manual removal by combing.
- 6)** Remove all nits. Separate hair sections and remove nits with a lice comb, baby safe scissors or your fingernails.
- 7)** For lice treatment, follow package directions carefully. Use the products over the sink, not in the tub!
- 8)** Wash bedding and recently worn clothing in hot water (above 130°F) and dry in high heat for 30 minutes. Combs and brushes should be soaked in hot water (not boiling) for 10 minutes.
- 9)** Avoid lice sprays! Vacuuming is the safest and best way to remove lice or fallen hairs with attached nits from furniture, rugs, stuffed animals and car seats.
- 10)** Notify your child's school, camp, child-care provider, play partners, and neighborhood parents. **Check for lice on a regular basis.**