How to do a Head Lice Inspection/Head-Check

Supplies:

Time – The person who is inspecting for head lice needs to conduct a careful and thorough search. Weekly home head checks are recommended.

Strong source of natural light, high intensity lamp, or strong flashlight – Nits reflect ultraviolet light, so natural light (near a window or outside) are the best. If natural light is not available, convenient, or sufficient, a lamp (>60-watt bulb) or strong flashlight (LED recommended) can be used.

Magnifying glass (with a light source if possible)(optional) – Nits are small and may be difficult for some people to see. Newly hatched and adult head lice are also tiny, crawl fast through hair, avoid light, and may be difficult to see in contrast with certain hair colors. A magnifying glass may assist in focusing on a small area and detecting movement. It may also be helpful for people with problems focusing at close distances.

Fine-toothed comb (lice comb) or other disposable hair parting tool (optional) – To examine the base of the hair nearest the scalp, most examiners will need to use a tool to part and lift the hair. If more than one person is being inspected, new tools should be used for each individual.

Inspection Method:

Head lice are best identified by inspecting the hair and scalp for live lice or nits (eggs attached to the hair shaft close to the scalp). The standard for identifying head lice is finding a live louse on the head. Lice and nits are most often found at the nape of the neck and above and behind the ears.

- Carefully part the hair and examine the hair and scalp for nits or crawling lice.
- Begin by inspecting the nape of the neck and the area behind the ears. If nothing is seen in these areas, continue to inspect the rest of the head.
- Most recently laid nits will be opaque, white, shiny, and located on a hair shaft within one-quarter inch of the scalp. Empty nit cases are more visible and are dull yellow in color.
- Dandruff, hair casts, globules of hair spray, and scalp conditions such as psoriasis or eczema may easily be mistaken for nits. To differentiate between nits and other debris, remember that hair debris is easily detached or loosened from the hair shaft, and nits are firmly attached to the hair and are not easily removed. Nits are also usually found one-quarter inch or more from the scalp due to hair growth following the initial attachment. By the time the hair has grown sufficiently for the egg case to be one-half inch from the scalp, the egg has either hatched or is non-viable.

Image: CDC Comparison of Head Lice Stages

If you find head lice or nits within ¼ inch of the scalp, contact your physician or pharmacist for treatment advice. Notify the school. Inform close friends and playmates that may have been exposed.

Source: Michigan Department of Community Health. 2013. Michigan Head Lice Manual.