What Are Head Lice?

Head lice are one of the most common communicable conditions. An estimated 6 to 12 million infestations occur each year in the United States, most commonly among children ages 3 to 11 years old. Live lice feed on human blood and live close to the human scalp. They are not dangerous and do not transmit disease, but they are contagious.1
Head lice often infest people with good hygiene and grooming habits. Children in preschool or elementary school, and those who live with them, are the most commonly affected.

You may see different forms of head lice when checking or treating your child: eggs, baby lice and adult lice. The eggs, also called nits, are tiny, tear-drop shaped eggs that attach to the hair shaft. They are often found around the nape of the neck or the ears. Nits may appear yellowish or white, and can look similar to dandruff. Nymphs, or baby lice, are smaller and grow to adult size in one to two weeks. Adult lice are the size of a sesame seed and tan to grayish-white.

**Myth**: Only dirty people get head lice.
**Fact**: Personal hygiene or household or school cleanliness are not factors for infestation. In fact, head lice often infest people with good hygiene and grooming habits.

**Myth**: Head lice carry diseases.
**Fact**: Head lice do not spread diseases.

**Myth**: Head lice can be spread by sharing hairbrushes, hats, clothes and other personal items.
**Fact**: It is uncommon to spread head lice by contact with clothing or other personal items, such as combs, brushes and hair accessories that have been in contact with a person with head lice.

**Myth**: Head lice can jump or fly, and can live anywhere.
**Fact**: Head lice cannot jump or fly; they only move by crawling. And it’s highly unlikely to find head lice living on objects like helmets or hats because they have feet that are specifically designed to grasp on to the hair shaft of humans. Additionally, a louse can only live for a few hours without feeding on a human host.

**Myth**: You can use home remedies like mayonnaise to get rid of head lice.
**Fact**: There is no scientific evidence that home remedies are effective treatments.

You should talk to your health care provider about treatment options, including prescription products that are currently available.