

Appendix B

Head Lice Facts

Adapted from the Canadian Pediatric Society Position Statement (Canadian Paediatric Society 2008)

Head lice are wingless, 2 mm to 4 mm long (adult louse), six-legged, insects that live and feed on the scalp of humans. They do not jump or fly. They do not carry or spread disease. Head lice are not a sign of poor hygiene.

A child usually carries fewer than 20 mature head lice, each of which, if untreated, live for 3 to 4 weeks. Head lice stay close to the scalp for food, warmth, shelter and moisture. Head lice can move quickly on dry hair, so they are difficult to see. The head louse feeds every 3 hours to 6 hours by sucking blood and simultaneously injecting saliva. These bites can sometimes make the scalp itchy.

After mating, the adult female louse can produce 5 to 10 eggs per day for 30 days, each in a shell (a nit) that is “glued” to the hair shaft near the scalp. The eggs hatch 6 to 12 days later into nymphs that molt several times over the next 7 to 15 days to become adult head lice. The hatched empty eggshells (nits) remain on the hair, but are not a source of re-infestation. Nymphs and adult head lice can survive for up to 3 days away from the human host.

Head lice are spread by direct head-to-head contact with someone who has head lice, or to a lesser extent by sharing combs, brushes or hats.

