

Poison Prevention Press

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Safe Use of Lice Products

Follow these tips to prevent harmful effects when using lice treatments:

- Read and follow directions on the product label before every use.
- Do not use more than the recommended amount of any lice medicine unless instructed by the doctor.
- Talk to your doctor before treating a child more than twice with the same medication.
- Cover the eyes when applying the medicine. If it does get into the eyes, they should be flushed immediately.
- Know how to identify lice and nits to avoid unnecessary treatment. Overuse could cause resistance and/or dangerous side effects.

Did you know that...

- There are 6-12 million cases of head lice in the U.S. each year?
- The yearly health cost of treating head lice in the U.S. is as high as \$1 billion?

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Little Bug, Big Problem: Current Lice Treatments

Head Lice is very common in children from 3-11 years old. Lice are insects that feed on the blood from the scalp to survive. People can get lice through close personal contact or when they share their hats or clothes with other people because lice have to crawl in order to get on those items.



Therapy is only required if live lice are seen. Usually, a parent or caregiver looks on the child's scalp for live lice or nits using a comb or magnifying glass. Nits are lice eggs. They are gray-white in color and as small as thread knots. Nits are found on the hair shaft close to the scalp on the back of the head, neck and behind ears. Adult lice are white, brown or dark gray and move really fast.

There are several medicines that can be used on the scalp to treat head lice. These medicines must be used as directed on the label to prevent harmful effects.

Pyrethrins/Piperonyl Butoxide (Rid®) is approved for children over 2 years of age and available over-the-counter. It only kills live lice so a second application is needed a week later to kill nits. Some minor side effects include dry, itchy skin; redness; and scaly patches. This should not be used in people with ragweed allergies.

Permethrin (Nix®) is over-the-counter man-made pyrethroids similar to pyrethrins, but can be used in children 2 months and older. It only kills live lice, not nits. If lice are seen after at least 7 days, a second application may be needed. Itchy skin and redness are the minor effects that can occur.

Unfortunately, lice are becoming resistant to pyrethrin and permethrin products. Other treatments may be necessary and are available with a prescription.

Malathion (Ovide®) kills live lice and sometimes kills nits. It is used on children 6 years of age and older. Malathion is flammable so do not use electrical heat sources such as hair dryers when applying the medicine. It can also be irritating to the scalp, skin, and eyes. If this product is swallowed it can lead to more serious side effects.

Benzyl Alcohol (Ulesfia®) works differently than the other medicines and is approved in children 6 months and older. It works by suffocating the lice and will need a second application. Benzyl alcohol can irritate the eyes and may cause an itchy scalp.

Spinosad (Natroba™) is approved for use in ages 4 years and older and contains some benzyl alcohol. It kills both live lice and the eggs so there is no need for a second application unless lice are seen after 7 days. Also, nit combing is not required. There are few serious side effects, but there have been reports of eye and scalp irritation.

Ivermectin (Sklice®) was approved by the FDA in 2012 for the treatment of head lice in children 6 months of age and older. It only kills adult live lice, but prevents lice eggs from surviving. A single application on dry hair with no nit combing is all that is needed. Some side effects include eye irritation, dandruff, dry skin, itchy skin, and skin burning sensation.

Lindane has been around since the 1950s, but has been associated with serious toxic effects. Lindane can lead to seizures, respiratory problems, and even death. Although lindane is approved by the FDA for the treatment of head lice, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) no longer recommends it as a treatment option.

Proper application of these products is important for lice treatment. It will help avoid any side effects. If any of these products are accidentally swallowed or get into the eyes, call the poison center immediately at 1-800-222-1222 and one of our poison specialists will help.

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