

Head Lice

Fact sheet for families and patients

What are Head Lice?

- Head lice are small insects (about the size of a grain of sugar when fully grown) that live very close to the scalp.
- Nits are not the same as lice. Nits are the eggs which stick to the hair.
- You only have head lice if you find a living, moving louse (not a nit).
- Anybody can get head lice – adults and children.
- Head lice don't care if the hair is dirty or clean, short or long.
- A lot of infections are caught from close family and friends in the home and community, not at school.
- Head lice can walk from one head to another, if the heads are pressed together for some time. They do not fly, jump or swim.
- Regular hair care may help to spot lice early.
- The best way to stop infection is for families to check their heads regularly using detection combing.

How to detect head lice?

You will need: A head lice detection comb (These are available from your pharmacist – ask for help if there are none on display.)

- Wash the hair well and towel dry until damp, but not dripping. Add conditioner to the hair as this makes the hair easier to comb.
- Ensure that there is good lighting – daylight is best.
- First, comb the hair with an ordinary comb. Then, using the detector comb, begin at the top of the head and making sure that the comb is touching the scalp, slowly draw the comb towards the end of the hair.
- Check the teeth of the comb carefully.
- Repeat steps (3) and (4), working your way around the head from the top of the scalp to the ends of the hair. This should take 10 to 15 minutes.
- If there are head lice, you will find one or more on the teeth of the comb.
- If you find lice, or something which you are unsure about, stick it to a piece of paper with clear sticky tape and take it to your General Practitioner or local pharmacist.

The best way to stop infection is to do detection combing regularly.

Using insecticidal liquids, lotions or shampoos "just in case" does not prevent Head Lice

How to treat head lice

Do not treat unless you are sure you have found a living, moving louse.

Head lice shampoos and mousses are not effective treatments. You will need a special lotion or liquid. Ask your General Practitioner or local Pharmacist to recommend the correct treatment for you to use.

In a well-ventilated room ...

- Apply the head lice lotion or liquid to dry hair.
- Part the hair near the top of the head, put a few drops of lotion or liquid on to the scalp and rub in. Part the hair again a bit further down the scalp and rub in some more of the lotion or liquid. Do this again and again until the whole scalp is wet. You don't need to take the lotion or liquid any further down the hair than where you would put a pony tail band. Head lice live within 2 inches of the scalp. Take care not to get the lotion or liquid in the eyes or on the face.
- You should use at least one small bottle of lotion or liquid per head; more if the hair is thick (the length of hair doesn't matter).
- Let the lotion or liquid dry on the hair naturally. Keep well away from naked flames, cigarettes or other sources of heat. DO NOT use a hair dryer.
- Leave on the hair for 12 hours or overnight. Then wash and rinse as normal.
- Repeat the entire treatment seven days later, using a second bottle of the same lotion or liquid.
- Check the head two days after the second treatment. If you still find living, moving lice, ask your pharmacist or General Practitioner for advice.
- To remove the nits, comb the hair, add conditioner while wet and use a head lice detection comb.

The problem hasn't gone away? Did you ...

- use enough lotion or liquid?
- apply it correctly?
- use a second treatment 7 days after the first?
- check all your close family and friends?
- let it dry naturally?
- leave it on for 12 hours?
- check adults as well as children?
- treat all infected contacts at the same time?

Remember

It doesn't matter how many nits you have, or how itchy your scalp is – if you can't find a living, moving louse, you don't have lice.

Life Cycle of Head Lice

Female lays about six eggs in a night. She cements these to the base of the hair shaft within 1cm of the scalp. These eggs are grey in colour.

Eggs hatch in 7-10 days. The empty egg/nit turns pearly white and remains glued to the hair shaft as it grows out. Their continued presence after treatment is not a sign of treatment failure.

Adult louse



Actual size

Head louse egg



Actual size

Young head louse



Actual size

The lice feed six times a day by piercing the skin and sucking blood. This is the process that makes scalps itchy.