

Self-care information on...

Head lice



What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny grey/brown insects. They are the size of a pinhead when hatched and about the size of a sesame seed (the seeds on burger buns) when fully grown. They cannot fly, jump or swim. Head lice lay eggs which hatch after 7-10 days.

Nits are the empty white egg shells which are left when the lice hatch. Nits look like dandruff, but stick strongly to hair.

Head lice are spread by head-to-head contact, climbing from the hair of one person to the next. Head lice are not the result of having dirty hair or poor hygiene. Head lice only affect humans and cannot be passed on to animals or be caught from them.

What are the symptoms of head lice?

Many people with head lice do not have any symptoms. An itchy scalp occurs in some cases. This is due to an allergy to the lice. It often takes about three months for an itch to develop after you catch lice. Therefore, you may not notice that you have head lice for a while. Head lice and nits do not wash off with normal shampoo.

Looking for head lice

Head lice are difficult to find just by looking in the hair. If you suspect that you or your child has head lice, you should comb your or your child's hair using a detection comb.

A detection comb is a special fine toothed comb that will catch any lice on the hair. This will allow you to be certain that you or your child has head lice. Detection combs have a tooth spacing of less than 0.3mm. They are available to buy from most pharmacies.

A diagnosis of head lice can only be made when a louse is found. Unhatched eggs or nits (empty eggshells) alone are not enough to diagnose an active head lice problem.

You can use a detection comb on dry or wet hair. However, combing wet hair works better because lice remain motionless when wet.

Wet hair method

1. Wash the hair in the normal way with ordinary shampoo. Rinse out the shampoo and put on lots of ordinary conditioner. Use a normal comb to straighten and untangle the hair.
2. Once the comb moves freely through the hair without dragging, switch to the louse detection comb.
3. Slot the teeth of the detection comb into the hair at the roots so it is touching the scalp. Draw the detection comb through to the tips of the hair.
4. Make sure that all parts of the hair are combed by working around the head.
5. Check the comb for lice after each stroke.
6. If you see any lice, clean the comb by wiping it on a tissue or rinse it before the next stroke.
7. After the whole head has been combed, rinse out the conditioner.
8. Repeat the combing procedure in the wet hair to check for any lice that might have been missed the first time.

Dry hair method

1. Straighten and untangle the dry hair using an ordinary comb.
2. Once the comb moves freely through the hair without dragging, switch to a detection comb
3. Comb the hair from the scalp to the end of the hair, combing each section of hair 3-4 times before moving on to the next section.
4. Look for lice as the comb is drawn through the hair. If you see a louse, trap it against the face of the comb with your thumb. This helps to avoid losing the louse as the comb is removed from the hair.
5. Continue combing the hair, section by section, until the whole head has been combed through.

If you discover head lice in your or your child's hair, you should check the rest of the family and alert close friends. If your child has head lice you should inform your child's school.

Treatment should only be carried out after live head lice have been found.
Do not treat hair 'just in case'.

How do you treat head lice?

Head lice can either be treated by:

1. Wet combing the hair
2. Applying medicated lotions to the hair

Medicated lotions and sprays do not prevent head lice infestations and should only be used if a live louse has been found on your or your child's head.

It is important to note that the itching may continue for days or weeks, even after all head lice have been removed.

1. Wet combing method

The wet combing method involves removing the head lice by combing the hair using a louse detection comb. You will need to do this on every member of the household who has head lice.

1. Follow steps 1 – 8 described under **Looking for head lice - wet hair method.**
2. Repeat the procedure on days five, nine and 13 so that you clear young lice as they hatch.

2. Medicated lotion or spray

Medicated lotions and sprays contain insecticides which kill the head lice. No medicated treatment is 100% effective. Crème rinses and shampoos are not effective and are therefore not recommended.

Your pharmacist will be able to recommend a lotion or spray that is suitable for you or your child.

Head lice and school

There is no need for children with head lice to be kept off school.

Head lice and clothing

Head lice soon die when away from hair. They do not live in clothes, bedding or soft toys. Hot washing or fumigation is not necessary to control head lice.

If you need any further information:

- Ask your pharmacist
- NHS choices: www.nhs.uk
- Patient UK www.patient.co.uk

