

Health Office Fact Sheet



Head Lice

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny insect parasites that live on the human head, feeding on the scalp several times a day. Head lice reproduce by laying their eggs (nits) on the hair shaft close to the scalp.

How do head lice spread?

Head lice cannot fly, jump or swim. They spread through head-to-head contact with another person who has head lice. Brushes and combs may transfer head lice but not viable eggs as these are very difficult to detach from the hair shaft. Head lice do not spread through bed linen, clothing or head gear.

What are the signs of head lice?

The scalp may itch although it may take weeks for the itch to develop. Crawling head lice may be seen in the hair, adult lice are usually dark brown in colour and 2 to 3mm long. Eggs are grey-white and about the size of a grain of salt. They may be seen attached to the hair shaft but may be tiny and very hard to see.

How do I look for head lice?

To check hair for head lice, carefully comb plenty of hair conditioner through dry hair, then comb again in sections with a fine-tooth 'nit' comb. Wipe the comb onto a white paper towel and examine the towel for head lice and eggs.

What should I do if I find head lice?

Check all household members for head lice. Inform the school and any other contacts, including relatives and friends, so that they may be checked.

How do I treat head lice?

Head lice can be removed more easily by applying plenty of hair conditioner to dry hair before combing to remove lice and eggs (nits). Any type of conditioner may be used, this works by immobilising the lice so that it is easier to trap them in the teeth of the comb. Suitable combs may be purchased from most pharmacies. Section and comb the hair thoroughly with the nit comb into 4 directions-forwards, backwards, left and right and continue combing the hair in sections until the whole head has been screened. Rinse hair when finished and dry the hair. Repeat this process **every one to two days over a 10 day period**, to cover the hatching cycle of the eggs. Regular inspection of your child's hair will help reduce the risk of circulation. Insecticides have also been shown to be effective in the treatment of head lice, but product guidelines should be strictly adhered to for safe and positive results. Reputable pharmacies will assist you with your product selection.

The following web sites were used to compile these facts:

- http://hcd2.bupa.co.uk/fact_sheets/Mosby_factsheets/head_lice.html
- http://www.hpa.org.uk/webw/HPAweb&HPAwebStandard/HPAweb_C/1195733839543?p=1192454969657
- <http://www.cdc.gov/lice/head/factsheet.html>