

## Headlice - Please check your child's hair



Head lice are tiny wingless insects that are grey-brown in colour. They are the size of a pinhead when they hatch and 3mm long (the size of a sesame seed) when fully grown. Head lice cannot fly, jump or swim. They are spread by head-to-head contact and climb from the hair of an infected person to the hair of someone else.

A female head louse lays eggs by cementing them to hairs (often close to the root) where they will be kept warm by the scalp. The eggs are pinhead size and difficult to see. When the baby lice hatch 7 to 10 days later, the empty eggshells (nits) remain glued in

place. Nits glisten white and become more noticeable as the growth of the hair carries them away from the scalp. Head lice feed by biting the scalp and sucking blood through it. They take 6 to 10 days to become fully grown. Once mature, a head louse can transfer from head to head. After mating, a female may start to lay eggs as early as the seventh day after she has hatched. So to break the life cycle and stop head lice spreading, they need to be removed from the head before the sixth day after hatching.

Children are most commonly affected by head lice, although anyone with hair can catch them. Children are often affected by head lice because they tend to have more head-to-head contact while at school or during play. Head lice are most common in children between 4 to 11 years old.

Head lice can be effectively treated using medicated lotions or by wet combing, using a specially designed head lice comb. Head lice can sometimes be difficult to treat due to a high re-infestation rate and their ability to develop resistance to traditional insecticides contained in some medications. It is thought that head lice will not develop immunity to the newer silicone- and oil-based preparations because they have a physical rather than a chemical action on lice. After a head lice infestation has been confirmed, you can treat the lice at home by wet comb using a head lice comb or medicated lotions (see below). However, neither treatment method will protect against re-infestation if head-to-head contact is made with someone with head lice during the treatment period.

The wet-combing method involves removing the head lice by systematically combing the hair using a special fine-toothed comb with a spacing of less than 0.3mm. Your pharmacist can advise you on which combs are suitable. No medicated products are necessary for wet combing. This can be beneficial because head lice are becoming more resistant to the insecticides that are commonly used to remove them. However, the success of the wet-combing method depends on adopting a painstaking approach that involves regular and thorough combing.

The wet-combing method is described below.

- Wash the hair using ordinary shampoo and apply ample conditioner, before using a wide-toothed comb to straighten and untangle the hair.
- Once the comb moves freely through the hair without dragging, switch to the louse detection comb. Make sure that the teeth of the comb slot into the hair at the roots with the bevel-edge of the teeth lightly touching the scalp.
- Draw the comb down to the ends of the hair with every stroke and check the comb for lice.
- Remove lice by wiping or rinsing the comb.
- Work methodically through the hair section by section so that the whole head of hair is combed through.
- Rinse out the conditioner and repeat the combing procedure in the wet hair.
- Repeat the procedure on day five, nine and 13 in order to clear the young lice as they hatch, before they have time to reach maturity.

The time that it will take to comb your child's hair will depend on the type of hair that they have and its length. For example, short, straight hair can be quickly prepared and can be fine-toothed combed in a few minutes, whereas longer, curlier hair will take longer to comb. (Photo courtesy of kidsmeds.info. Text courtesy of HNS Choices)