

# Treating and controlling head lice



While children are at school many families will have contact with head lice. The information here will help you treat and control head lice.

## Catching head lice

Head lice have been around for many thousands of years. Anyone can get head lice and given the chance head lice move from head to head without discrimination.

Head lice are small, wingless, blood sucking insects. Their colour varies from whitish-brown to reddish-brown. Head lice only survive on humans. If isolated from the head they die very quickly, usually within 24 hours.

People get head lice from direct **hair to hair contact** with another person who has head lice. This can happen when people play, cuddle or work closely together.

Head lice do not have wings or jumping legs so they cannot fly or jump from head to head. They can only crawl.

## Finding head lice

Many lice do not cause an itch, so you have to **look carefully to find** them.

Head lice are found on hair itself and move to the scalp to feed. They have six legs which end in a claw and they rarely fall from the head. Louse eggs (also called nits) are laid within 1.5cm of the scalp and are firmly attached to the hair. They resemble dandruff but can't be brushed off.

Lice can crawl and hide. The easiest and most effective way to find them is to follow these steps:

Step 1	Comb any type of hair conditioner on dry, brushed (detangled) hair. This stuns the lice and makes it difficult for them to grip the hair or run around.
Step 2	Now comb sections of the hair with a fine tooth head lice comb.
Step 3	Wipe the conditioner from the comb onto a paper towel or tissue.
Step 4	Look on the tissue and on the comb for lice and eggs.
Step 5	Repeat the combing for every part of the head at least 4 or 5 times.

If lice or eggs are found, the child's hair should be treated.

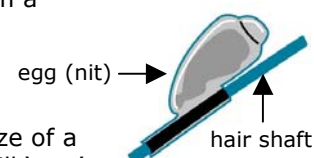
If your child has been treated recently and you only find empty hatched eggs, you may not have to treat as the empty eggs could be from a previous episode.

## Head lice eggs

Head lice eggs are small (the size of a pinhead) and oval. A live egg will 'pop' when squashed between fingernails.

Dead eggs have crumpled sides and hatched eggs look like tiny boiled eggs with their tops cut off.

To optimise treatment remove as many eggs as possible.



## Head lice combs

Combs with long, rounded stainless steel teeth positioned very close together have been shown to be the most effective, however, any head lice comb can be used.

## Treating head lice

Concentrate on the head—there is **no evidence** to suggest that you need to clean the house or classroom.

Head lice products must be applied to **all parts of the hair and scalp**.

**No treatment kills all of the eggs** so treatment must involve two applications seven days apart. The purpose of the first treatment is to kill all lice, the second treatment is to kill young lice hatched over the next six days.

Cover the person's eyes, for example with a towel, while the treatment is being applied.

If you are using lotions, apply the product to dry hair.

For shampoos, wet the hair, but use the least amount of water possible.

Apply the treatment near the scalp, using an ordinary comb to cover the hair from root to tip. Repeat this several times until all the hair is covered.

If you choose not to use an insecticide, the conditioner and comb method can be used every second day until there have been no live lice found for ten days.

There is no need to treat the whole family, unless they also have head lice.

Only the pillowcase requires special laundering; either wash it in hot water (at least 60°C) or dry it using a clothes dryer on the hot or warm setting.

## Testing resistance

Head lice products belong in one of the following categories depending on the active compound they contain:

- Pyrethrins
- Synthetic pyrethroids (permethrin and bioallethrin)
- Organophosphates (maldison or malathion)
- Herbal, with or without natural (non-chemical) pyrethrins.

Insecticide resistance is common so you should test if lice are dead. If they are, treat again in seven days using the same product. If the lice are not dead, the treatment has not worked and the lice are resistant to the product and all products containing the same active compound. Wash off the product and treat as soon as possible using a product containing a different active compound. If the insecticide has worked, the lice will be dead within 20 minutes.

Any head lice product could cause a reaction and should be used with care by women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, children less than 12 months and people with allergies, asthma or open wounds on the scalp. If you are unsure, please check with your pharmacist or doctor.

## Preventing head lice

There is no product available to prevent head lice. Using the **conditioner and comb method once a week** will help you detect any head lice early and minimise the problem. Tying back long hair can help prevent the spread of head lice.

## Regulations

Children with head lice are required under the Health (Infectious Diseases) Regulations to be excluded from school, day care or crèche until treatment has commenced. A child with head lice can be treated one evening and return to school the next day, even if there are still some eggs present.

## Further information

See website:

<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/headlice>

The information in this pamphlet is based on the research conducted and written by Associate Professor Rick Speare and the team of researchers at, School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, James Cook University.

Life cycle diagram courtesy of Nitpickers.

