

Head Lice

Did you know? Head lice and nits are common in young children and their families. They do not have anything to do with dirty hair and are picked up by head-to-head contact.

Head lice are tiny insects that only live on humans. The eggs are grey or brown and about the size of a pinhead which stick to the hair, close to the scalp. The eggs hatch in 7 to 10 days. Empty eggshells (nits) are white and shiny and are found further along the hair shaft as they grow out.

Head lice are spread by direct head-to-head contact and therefore tend to be more common in children because of the way they play. They cannot jump, fly or swim. Itching and scratching occurs 2 to 3 weeks after coming into close contact with someone who has headlice.

Exclusion is not required and your child should continue to attend school.

How to get rid of head lice

Treat head lice as soon as you spot them. You can treat head lice without seeing a GP.

Check everyone you live with, or have close contact with, and start treating anyone who has head lice on the same day.

There's no need to keep your child off school if they have head lice. You do not need to wash your laundry on a hot wash.

Wet combing

Lice and nits can be removed by wet combing.

You can buy a special fine-toothed comb (detection comb) online or from pharmacies to remove head lice and nits.

There may be instructions on the pack, but usually you:

- wash hair with ordinary shampoo
- apply lots of conditioner (any conditioner will do)
- comb the whole head of hair, using the detection comb, from the roots to the ends

It usually takes about 10 minutes to comb short hair, and 20 to 30 minutes for long, frizzy or curly hair. When you've finished combing the hair, comb through all the hair again for a second time.

Do wet combing on days 1, 5, 9 and 13 to catch any newly hatched head lice. Check again that everyone's hair is free of lice on day 17.

Medicated lotions and sprays

If wet combing has not worked or is not suitable, you could try a medicated lotion or spray. These kill head lice in all types of hair, and you can buy them from pharmacies, supermarkets or online.

Head lice should die within a day. Some lotions and sprays come with a comb to remove dead lice and eggs.

Some treatments need to be repeated after a week to kill any newly hatched lice.

Check the pack to see if they're OK for you or your child to use, and how to use them.

If lotions or sprays do not work, speak to a pharmacist about other treatments.

You cannot prevent head lice

There's nothing you can do to prevent head lice. You can help stop them spreading by wet combing regularly, using a detection comb, to catch them early.

Do not use medicated lotions and sprays to prevent head lice. They can irritate the scalp.