

Head Lice Information

What are head lice?

Head lice are small insects that have been around for thousands of years and are well established throughout the world. They live on the heads of their human hosts, scuttling around on the scalp and feeding on blood. Adult head lice lay eggs (often called nits) on the hair, usually within 5 mm of the scalp. Eggs found further up the hair are dead or hatched.

Head lice are specialised to live on human heads and can only live for a short time (about a day) away from one. They don't live anywhere else on the body, or on any other animals.

Head lice are hard to see because they are small, can hide in the hair, and come in various shades of brown and grey. Adult head lice are between 1 - 3 mm long. The eggs are usually pale in colour and about a millimetre in size.

An adult head louse:



Actual size: 

Head lice are happy on any head, whether the hair is long, short, young, old, clean, or dirty.

Head lice do not cause harm, or spread diseases from one person to another. Most of the harm associated with head lice is in the overuse or incorrect use of treatments to get rid of them!

How do I get them?

Head lice wander all over the scalp and simply step from one hair to another when two heads are close enough to touch. Head lice have no wings and cannot fly. They cannot hop, jump, or swim either.

Sometimes head lice travel from one head to another on a comb, hairbrush, hair tie, or hat.

How do I know I've got them?

Sometimes head lice make your head itchy and you notice that you're scratching your head a lot. Often, they don't though and the only way you will know is by looking.

The best way to find out is by detection combing. To do this you will need an ordinary comb, a fine-tooth comb, and a bottle of hair conditioner.

Long or thick hair can take a long time, up to an hour, to treat. Sit in an area with good light, and get comfortable.

1. Comb the hair with the ordinary comb.
2. Cover the dry hair with conditioner from the roots to the tips.
3. (If you have a lot of hair, do this step with one section of hair at a time.) Comb the hair from root to tip with the fine-tooth comb. Wipe the comb on a tissue between strokes and you will see any head lice that the combing dislodges. You may see eggs as well.
4. Comb each section of hair twice.

How do I get rid of them?

There are several ways to get rid of head lice.

- Simply using the detection combing method every two or three days (until you don't find head lice for ten days) is an easy and effective method, particularly for short or fine hair. It is also cheap, and doesn't involve any chemicals.
- You can buy head lice shampoos and lotions from pharmacies. These contain insecticides to kill the head lice. It is important to follow the instructions for using these products, and to only use them if you are sure you have head lice. Do not use them "just in case".

Head lice can become resistant to insecticides. You must check that the chemical treatment has worked. If detection combing 24 hours after the treatment detects large, living head lice, the treatment may have failed. Talk to your pharmacist, doctor, or Public Health nurse and try a treatment with a different insecticide in it, or try using the detection combing method every few days instead of a chemical preparation.

- Pharmacies also sell "natural" head lice treatments. Some are effective because they contain an insecticide. Others contain ingredients which stun the head lice, or make the hair slippery, so that combing removes the lice and eggs.

Whichever treatment you use, continue detection combing regularly to detect and remove any newly hatched head lice.

Never use insecticides such as fly spray, or pet flea sprays to treat head lice. These could cause serious harm!

How do I keep them away?

- If one person in the house has head lice, it is a good idea to check everyone for them. Use the detection combing method.
- Brush hair regularly. Brushing or combing can remove head lice before they have the chance to lay many eggs.
- Tie up long hair to help prevent head lice spreading.
- Avoid sharing hair ties, hats and helmets, or bedding. Head lice do not live very long away from a head however, so are not often transferred from one person to another this way.
- Notify the school if you have head lice, so that parents can be reminded to check for them.
- Use the detection combing technique regularly.

Head Lice Life Cycle



A female louse only needs to mate once in its life. If it doesn't mate, it still lays eggs, but they don't hatch. Up to 8 eggs can be laid each day.



Eggs are "glued" on to the hair, near the scalp. They hatch within seven to ten days.



The new louse is transparent until it has its first drink...



Young lice moult three times before they are fully grown.



Young lice reach adulthood at around nine to twelve days of age.



Lice die of old age at around 40 days, unless they are killed before that. A female may have laid 100 eggs by then.