

What are head lice?

Headlice are small insects (about the size of a pin head or sesame seed when fully grown). They live very close to the scalp. Although not a serious health hazard they can be an unpleasant nuisance. Headlice do not care whether the hair is clean or dirty, long or short! Infection is most common amongst children aged between 4 and 11 years old. Headlice need to stay on a person's head in order to survive so there is no need to wash or disinfect clothing or bedding that comes into contact with headlice.

So what are nits?

Nits are not the same as lice. They are the empty egg cases that are stuck to the base of the hair by the adult louse. The egg cases remain when the lice hatch.

How are they spread?

Headlice do not hop, skip or jump from one head to another! They need quite extensive head to head contact (at least a minute) to walk from one infected head to another. Headlice are therefore much more likely to be spread within a family or between close friends at school. Hence, when one member of a family has headlice, it is important that the whole family receive treatment.

How do I know when my child has them?

It is recommended that you check your child's hair regularly (at least weekly) using a detector comb. If this is done, it will mean that you will detect the problem before they are allowed to multiply, when removal can be more difficult.

How do I perform the 'detecting' combing method?

You will need a plastic detector comb (available from your pharmacist). Wash hair using an ordinary shampoo, towel dry and apply conditioner. Make sure you have good lighting.

First, comb the hair with an ordinary comb. Then using the detecting comb, begin at the top of the head, touching the scalp and draw the comb slowly down towards the end of the hair. Check the teeth comb carefully after each section is combed (wipe comb on a tissue or rinse in basin of clean water).

Do this regularly and check all members of the family at the same time.

What about treatment?

Treatment is only needed if you find a living, moving louse.

If so, there are 2 options:

1. Lotions or crème rinses using insecticides

Follow the instructions carefully. In addition apply the following principles:

Ventilate the room well and ensure you have enough lotion - one small bottle per head.

If washing the hair before treatment, do not apply conditioner. Repeat the treatment in 7 days to kill lice which may have hatched since the first treatment.

Check hair 3 days after second treatment; if a living, moving louse is found contact the pharmacist/GP/school nurse for advice. A different treatment may be recommended.

2. The bug busting treatment method

Wet combing physically removes the lice from the hair, preventing them maturing and spreading.

Apply conditioner and use detector comb in the same way as for detection. It can take 30 minutes or more to remove all the lice.

Make sure you use clean rinse water for final rinse.

Repeat the process every 3 or 4 days for at least 2 weeks until no living lice are found. If fully grown lice are found at any time after the first session, this indicates a new headlice infection. Once clear, continue regular detection.