

Department of Health and Humans Services (DHHS)

INFORMATION ON HEAD LICE FOR SCHOOL USE

I don't want head lice! How do I prevent my family getting them?

Are head lice only in schools?

Head lice will spread anywhere people work, play or live together. They spread easily in schools because children are more likely to be in close contact with each other.

How will I know for sure if my family has head lice?

Head lice are small insects that have no wings. They hide in the hair and come down to the scalp to feed. They are difficult to see and move very quickly. A magnifying glass and good light can help you find them.

Probably the best way to find them is to apply hair conditioner to the hair covering it well from root to tip. The conditioner will slow down the lice so they can be combed out with a fine-tooth comb. As you go, wipe the comb on a tissue and look for lice and eggs. Comb every part of the hair from root to tip at least five times.

The other sign of head lice is the presence of eggs (often called nits). Head lice eggs are white and very small. You can tell they are different from dandruff because they stick firmly to the hair. Head lice usually lay their eggs within 1.5cm of the scalp so eggs which are further than 2cm from the scalp are likely to be either hatched or dead but still should be removed.

What can I do to avoid getting head lice?

Head lice can't fly, that can only crawl. They are spread by close contact and they don't live long off the body.

Avoid contact with other people's hair or things that have recently been in contact with someone else's hair. Don't share things like brushes, combs, hats, bathing caps and scrunchies. It's a good idea to keep hair really short or plait/braid long hair firmly.

Brushing hair really well – with a hairbrush each day is a good idea as it cripples head lice! This makes them less active but doesn't get rid of them.

Another tip is to check school-age children daily – it's easier to get rid of a few head lice than a lot!

What do I do if my child has head lice?

Check everyone in the household for head lice and treat everyone you find has head lice. The Family, Child and Youth Health Service has information sheets to help you with questions about what you need to do, what to use, how long your child has to stay away from school, etc.

If there are head lice about should I just use a head lice lotion from the pharmacy?

It's not a good idea to use head lice treatments any more often than you need to. So, first of all make sure your family actually has head lice!

?? Are there tiny (so tiny they're best seen in good light with a magnifying glass) insects without wings?

?? Are there eggs – white specks that stick to the hair (not like dandruff that can be flicked off)?

?? Do they look like this?



Do I really need to bother checking if our scalps aren't itchy?

Yes, some people – particularly adults don't always itch the way most children do but, if they aren't treated, they can be the cause of children getting head lice again. Beards are another place where head lice can be found.

What do I need to do to get rid of head lice?

You can use one of the various chemical treatments (ones containing malidison are currently recommended as the first choice in Tasmania) or use the hair conditioner combing method.

I think I'd like to use the lotion from the pharmacy –

It's wise not to use chemical lotions on children younger than two, women who are breastfeeding or pregnant or people with sensitive skin.

Ask for a lotion that contains malidison. (Every few years a different base is recommended to try to avoid head lice becoming resistant to the chemicals.) Follow the instructions CLOSELY. If you are sure you have followed the directions correctly and you still find live lice after using the treatment, do not continue to use that product. Talk to your local Family and Child Health Nurse or pharmacist about using a product that contains a different chemical or try the hair conditioner combing method. No chemical head lice treatment kills all the eggs so it is important to remove the eggs as well – the easiest way is with your fingernails – and to repeat the treatment in seven days.

Do not keep using products, which contain a lice-killing chemical.

We have very young children or we can't afford the Chemist's lotion –

It's wise to use the hair conditioner combing method for very young children, breastfeeding or pregnant women or family members who have sensitive skin.

The hair conditioner combing method can be successful but does take more time. Hair conditioner makes it easier to remove the head lice and eggs but it doesn't kill them. For this reason, you need to use the method every second day for a week, then twice weekly for two weeks and weekly for two months.

Wet the hair really well and then squeeze all the moisture out of it with a towel. Put a large amount of conditioner on the hair and comb out any tangles with a normal comb. Using a fine-tooth comb, go through the hair – small amounts at a time, combing from the scalp to the hair ends and then wiping lice off the comb (on to a tissue or towel) before starting on the next section of hair. Repeat combing each section of hair five times. When combing is finished the conditioner can be washed off. Finally it's important to remove all eggs – using your fingernails is easiest.

Do I need to do anything to clean our bedding or carpets?

In most instances, it's not necessary to do anything to clean carpets or bedding but it's a good idea to wash hair brushes in hot soapy water and dry them in the sun.

Do I need to worry about head lice?

Head lice can make children's scalps itchy. If head lice are left unchecked, the child will scratch the scalp until it bleeds and gets sore and it could become infected.

I've followed the instructions but the children keep getting head lice back!

Is there someone the children regularly visit or see who may have head lice?

It sometimes happens children pass on head lice to another adult such as a relative but because the person doesn't have an itchy scalp they don't realise they have head lice. Checking means beards too!

Or may be you're a parent on your own and have no-one who can check your head. Some parents have asked their local doctor or the local Family and Child Health Nurse to check their head.

Myths

Head lice cause disease.

People who aren't very clean get head lice.

Children always get head lice at school.

No itch means no head lice.

Facts

Head lice are a nuisance but they are not known to carry disease.

Head lice seem to particularly like clean hair.

Head lice are always about in the community. Parents and other relatives can unintentionally reinfest family members because they think that not being itchy means no head lice!

Adults don't seem to get itchy from head lice the way most children do.