

Head lice

Advice on treatments for head lice

Head lice are tiny insects that live in hair. Nits are the empty egg cases attached to hair that head lice hatch from.

Head lice are a common problem, particularly in school children aged 4-11.

They're largely harmless, but can live in the hair for a long time if not treated and can be irritating and frustrating to deal with.

How to spot head lice

Head lice can be difficult to spot, even when the head is closely inspected.

They're very small whitish or grey-brown insects that range from the size of a pinhead to the size of a sesame seed.

The only way to be sure someone has head lice is to find a live louse by combing their hair with a special fine-toothed comb. This is called detection combing.

Head lice (nits) eggs picture:



Less reliable signs of head lice include:

- small white eggs or nits (egg cases) in the hair behind the ears or at back of the neck – see image above
- an itchy scalp
- a rash on the back of the neck
- feeling as though something is moving in the hair

How to get rid of head lice and nits

Treatments to get rid of head lice are available to buy from pharmacies, supermarkets and online. You don't usually need to see your GP.

The main treatments are:

- lotions or sprays that kill head lice – these can be very effective, but some aren't suitable for pregnant or breastfeeding women, or for children under two
- removing head lice with a specially designed comb – this is suitable for everyone and relatively inexpensive, but needs to be repeated several times and can take a long time to do thoroughly

A pharmacist can advise you about the treatments available if you're not sure which is best for you or your child.

Make sure you carefully follow the instructions that come with the treatment you choose.

How you get head lice

Head lice are spread by direct head to head contact. They climb from one person's hair to another's.

Head lice:

- can't fly, jump or swim
- are very unlikely to be spread by objects such as hats, combs and pillows
- don't have a preference for dirty, clean, short or long hair
- only affect people and can't be caught from animals

Once detached from the hair, head lice will usually die within 12-24 hours

Preventing head lice

It's very difficult to prevent head lice.

You may want to consider regular detection combing – for example, on a weekly basis – if you're concerned about your children or yourself.

Lotions and sprays don't prevent head lice and should only be used if a live louse has been found in your or your child's hair.

Staying off work or school and washing clothing and bedding on a hot wash is unnecessary, as it's unlikely to help prevent the spread of head lice.

More information:

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions/head-lice-and-nits/treatment