

Head Lice (Nits)

Head louse infection is not primarily a problem of schools but of the wider community. It cannot be solved by the school, but the school can help the local community to deal with it.

Head lice are only transmitted by direct, prolonged, head-to-head contact.

Transmission of lice within the classroom is relatively rare. When it does occur, it is usually from a "best friend".

Head lice will not be eradicated in the foreseeable future, but a sensible, informed approach, based on fact not mythology, will help to limit the problem.

At any one time, most schools will have children who have active infection with head lice. This is often between 0% and 5%, rarely more.

Sometimes, the perception by parents, however, is often that there is a serious "outbreak" with many of the children infected. This is hardly ever the case. The "outbreak" is often an outbreak of agitation and alarm, not of louse infection and not a public health problem.

What are Head lice?

Head lice are tiny wingless insects that live in human hair. They are common, particularly in children.

Head lice are grey-brown in colour, the size of a pinhead when hatched and of a sesame seed when fully grown.

They cannot fly, jump or swim and are spread by head-to-head contact, climbing from the hair of an infected person to the hair of someone else.

A Head lice infestation is not the result of dirty hair or poor hygiene. Head lice can affect all types of hair irrespective of its condition and length.

Head lice only affect humans and cannot be passed on to animals or be caught from them.

Life cycle of head lice

A female Head louse lays eggs by cementing them to hairs (often close to the root) where they are kept warm by the scalp. The eggs are pinhead size and difficult to see.

After 7-10 days, the baby lice hatch and the empty eggshells remain glued in place. These remains are known as nits. Nits glisten white and become more noticeable as the hair grows and carries them away from the scalp.

Head lice feed by biting the scalp and feeding on blood. They take 6-10 days to become fully grown. Once mature, a head louse can crawl from head to head.

A female Head louse may start to lay eggs as early as seven days after she has hatched. So to break the cycle and stop them spreading, they need to be removed within seven days of hatching.

How to spot head lice

In most cases, itching is the main symptom of Head lice. It is not caused by the lice biting the scalp but by an allergy to the lice. However, not everyone experiences itching.



It's not always easy to see Head lice so detection combing is the best way of finding Head lice. This involves using a special fine-toothed Head lice comb (with tooth spacing of less than 0.3mm to trap the smallest lice) to comb through the hair. It works better on wet hair but can be used on dry hair.

Detection combs are available from pharmacies.

Treating head lice

Head lice can usually be effectively treated using medicated lotions or by wet combing, using a specially designed head lice comb.

Wet combing can be used without medicated lotions, but needs to be done regularly and can take a long time to do thoroughly. It is important to make sure that all the eggs have gone; sometimes there is the belief that children have 'caught ' Head lice again whereas in reality some eggs may have still been present, waiting to hatch.

Medicated lotion or spray can be used as an alternative. However, no medicated treatment is 100% effective. Your pharmacist will be able to recommend an over-the-counter lotion or spray. Your GP can also give advice if you are having difficulty eradicating them.

Preventing head lice

It's difficult to prevent a Head lice infestation. Regular detection combing - for example, on a weekly basis, is the best way to find new lice quickly.

Medicated lotions and sprays do not prevent head lice infestations and should only be used if a live louse has been found on yours or your child's head.

Parents' / carers' responsibilities

Parents or carers are responsible for preventing, detecting and treating head lice infections in their families by arranging:

To comb children's hair routinely to prevent the survival of lice.

To check hair regularly i.e. undertake detection combing once weekly for signs of infection and also to check amongst close contacts when informed of an infection.

To undertake "contact tracing" among all members of the family who have had head to head contact with an infected person. Contact tracing means informing people about the head lice infection so they can do detection combing and treat if necessary.

To promptly treat any members of the family who have a head lice infection.

To inform the school promptly if a school child is infected.

To use proprietary lotions only as a treatment when an infection is present and not as a preventative measure.

To seek help and advice from the school nursing team as necessary.

Children should **not** be kept away from school as long as the advice given above is being followed.

School's responsibility

When notified by parents, school will send out a letter to inform other parents that Head lice are present.

If parents are in need of advice or further support, the school will signpost them to the school nurse.

The school nurse holds regular drop in sessions for parents in school if parents wish to find out more.

Image of head lice



