

# Head Lice

**Head lice are mostly spread by head-to-head contact with someone who already has head lice. Having head lice is not a sign of poor hygiene and head lice do not carry or spread other diseases. Anyone can catch head lice at any age, but they most commonly affect children. Ask a pharmacist how to find and treat head lice.**

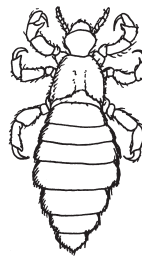
Head lice are wingless, crawling insects that live on human heads. They cannot survive off the human head for more than a day or two. Head lice live in the hair and feed on human blood by sucking it from the scalp. Their bites can be itchy.

Female head lice lay their eggs close to the scalp, on hair strands. The eggs are glued to the hair strands and hatch in about seven days. Eggs are most often laid behind the ears and at the nape of the neck. The eggs are also called nits.

## Signs and symptoms

Signs of head lice include:

- Itching scalp.
- Moving lice on the scalp or hair. They can be from 2-3mm long and from greyish-white to a reddish-brown colour.



Head Lice (magnified)



Live egg (nit) attached to hair (magnified)

- Small, pale eggs stuck to bases of hair strands. The eggs are not easily moved.
- Skin sores caused by scratching – which can become infected.

Head lice do not always cause itching or other symptoms, so need to be searched for.

## Finding head lice (detection combing)

Lice and eggs can be found by wet combing (also called 'conditioner and comb' method):

- Apply enough hair conditioner to cover each hair strand from root to tip. Apply the conditioner evenly and detangle hair using an ordinary comb. Conditioner can be applied to dry or wet hair. Hair conditioner makes it hard for lice to crawl or cling to hair. Any type of hair conditioner may be used.
- Divide the hair into 3-4cm sections and starting at the scalp, comb each section using a fine toothed lice comb.
- After each stroke, wipe the conditioner off the comb onto a paper towel and look for lice and eggs. Remove all eggs and lice from the comb after each stroke
- Repeat the combing at least twice for every part of the head and then thoroughly rinse the hair.

Battery operated electronic lice combs may also be used to find lice. Electronic combs are used in dry hair; conditioner is not needed. Electronic and other lice combs are available from pharmacies.

## Removing head lice

### Headlice combs

Head lice can sometimes be removed by wet combing, done every second day until no lice or eggs are found for

ten days in a row. Head lice can also be removed using an electronic lice comb. One type of electronic comb uses a special sweeper action and capture compartment to remove lice and eggs. Another type of electronic comb kills lice (but not eggs) by electrocution.

### Head lice products

Lice can be removed by using a product that kills head lice. These products are available as shampoos, mousses, conditioners, lotions and sprays, and are grouped according to the active ingredient:

1. Permethrin
2. Pyrethrins (or bioallethrin) with piperonyl butoxide
3. Maldison (malathion)
4. Dimeticone (dimethicone), isopropyl myristate, liquid paraffin
5. Herbal products and essential oils (e.g., eucalyptus oil, tea tree oil).

Lice may be resistant to a head lice product, so you need to check for live lice the day after treatment, using wet combing. If live lice are found after a product has been used correctly, then the head lice may be resistant, and a different product, containing an active ingredient from a different group, may be needed. Ask a pharmacist for advice.

When using a head lice product to kill head lice:

- Read and follow product instructions carefully
- Do not use near heaters or open fires

## Important

- Only use a product that kills head lice if you find living lice. If they are alive they will be moving. An itching scalp or the presence of eggs does not always mean active infestation. Overuse of head lice products can cause scalp irritation and may lead to lice becoming resistant to treatments.
- Do not use other insecticides or kerosene to treat head lice.
- Consult a pharmacist or doctor if:
  - You want to use a head lice product on a child under 2 years, or a pregnant or breast feeding woman
  - Lice are still present after using a head lice product
  - You want to use a head lice product to prevent head lice infestation
  - There are signs of infection (e.g., weeping and crusting on the skin, swollen glands, fever).

as some are highly flammable – check the label

- Dry hair with a towel, not a hair dryer, as heat can inactivate the product
- The product may not kill all head lice eggs. Apply the product a second time (or as many times as recommended by the product instructions), 7-10 days after the first treatment, to kill lice that may have hatched since the first treatment. In between treatments, remove eggs at least twice by wet combing, and/or use a product specially designed to help remove eggs.

**Note:** Itching may continue for a few days after the head lice have been killed.

## Contacts

School children often get and spread head lice. If your child has head lice you are advised to inform their school and everyone your child has been in close contact with over the past few weeks. This includes family and friends, young and old. Tell them to check themselves and their families for head lice. Only those who have head lice need to be treated and members of the same household who have lice should be treated at the same time. Children can be sent back to school after the first treatment.

## Self care

- Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a head lice product or head lice comb.
- Check hair for head lice and eggs at least once a week (using wet combing or an electronic comb) for several weeks after cure.
- After use, soak combs and brushes in hot water (at least 60°C) for at least 30 seconds.
- Wash towels, sheets, pillow cases and headwear in hot water (at least 60°C) or dry in clothes dryer for 15 minutes.
- Place items that can't be washed (e.g., soft toys and helmets) in airtight plastic bags for two weeks.

To help protect against head lice:

- Do not share hats, hairbrushes, combs and pillows
- Carry out weekly hair and scalp checks when lice are present in your community (e.g., at school)
- Keep long hair tied back.

## For more information

### Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

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Ask a pharmacist for advice when  
choosing a medicine.*

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